







# A TIBETAN NOMAD GIRL'S CHANGING WORLDS



Sonam Doomtso

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SUMMARY: Sonam Doomtso (b. 1987) describes her lived experiences and recollections encompassing the first twenty years of her life. These include living on the grassland in Sichuan Province, experiences with relatives and neighbors, attending schools, moving to Lhasa, religious fasting, pilgrimage, encounters with marmot hunters, attending school in Xining City, and the death of her beloved grandfather.

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## EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE

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Elizabeth Reynolds

Gerald Roche

Rin chen rdo rje

Timothy Thurston

Steve Frediani

# PEOPLE

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## B

Balo, Aunt Tsering Lhamo's husband

Basang, neighbor

## C

Cheme, brother

## D

Dadron, primary school classmate

Dakar, Aunt Tsering Lhamo's daughter

Dargye, neighbor

Dawa, young nomad from Walang

Dawa, middle school friend

Dechen Wangmo, cousin

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Dolkar, childhood friend

Dolkar, new neighbor's daughter

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

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I was born in Kunub Village, Lhasgan Township, Kangding County, Karze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China, in 1987. Most of Lhasgan Township is pasture where yaks and horses are herded. Mother was also born in Kunub and married Father - Padyang - a local farmer. She has three siblings - Dorji Dondup, Tsering Lhamo, and Yangdrol. I have three younger brothers - Lhodrul, Cheme, and Dorchu. When I was a few months old, we moved to Walang Village, fifty kilometers away.

Walang was my maternal Grandfather's home place. People there were nice and helpful. Mother, like other local women, was a nomad with little formal education. She spent much of her life in pastoral areas herding yaks and raising children. That was the common life for every nomad woman. Consequently, I spent my life with calves and yaks until I was seven. Later, both my family and my aunt's family moved to Lhasgan Township town, where I started school.

Most local herders speak Amdo Tibetan, but in Lhasgan Township town people speak the Kham dialect. I spoke Amdo at home and Kham in school where most of my classmates were farmers. Lhasgan Township is a very beautiful place with many forested mountains. Lhasgan Monastery is located in the township and many Tibetans often go there to make offerings and circumambulate the monastery.



## 2

### BIRTH

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**M**other recalls the month and the day when I was born because, she says, I am the greatest thing that ever happened to her - nothing compares with my birth. She carried me for more than nine months and I was an unusually large infant at birth. She suffered day and night with me inside her belly, while continuing to fetch water, cook, collect yak dung for fuel, milk, and herd yaks. Her life was hard during that time; the most difficult time she has ever experienced.

Father lacked all sense of family responsibility and ignored her pregnancy. She received little care and love from Father and I soon became a burden. All the work was hers. No one helped her. Father routinely went to town and stayed there, wandering aimlessly. Mother felt her marriage was a bitter misfortune.

It was early winter in the Year of the Rabbit. Mother lay on a pile of dried grass atop a yak-skin carpet. Pain became unbearable. She groaned louder, gave a big push, then another, and I was born with a loud cry. Mother fainted without a glance at me, her new infant. Grandmother picked me up, cut the umbilical cord, washed and dried me, rubbed my forehead with a daub of yak butter, wrapped me in a sheepskin, and put me near Mother, who was sweating profusely. Mother stretched out her hand, touched my head gently, and smiled.

"It's a girl, Chotso," Grandmother said.

Mother nodded, too tired to do more. I was the first baby in the family and was loved by everyone; I was the reason behind everyone's smiles. A month after my birth, Father returned from the county town and was somewhat upset to find a baby girl, because he had expected a boy. Reluctantly, he brought Mother and me to a great lama in a nearby monastery, who named me. Traditionally, a lama gives children a name,

which itself is a blessing throughout one's life.

"Sonam Doomtso is her name, which will bring fortune and good luck," said the lama.

"Thank you very much! Thank you!" Mother said with delight.

Families expect and hope to have a son to send to the monastery to bring merit to the family. If the son is truly worthy, he prostrates, rather than walks, all the way to Lhasa, a magnificent act. Girls, on the other hand, are kept at home. Daughters may marry and bring a husband into their home or, more commonly, move into their husband's home. No one is proud of having a daughter. I was lucky that most of my family were truly happy with my arrival. Father was unhappy with my gender, but accepted reality and spent more time with Mother and me, though he still did not work, and soon resumed going to the county town. I cried often and Mother frequently stayed up the whole night in the darkness, cradling me in her arms, bouncing me gently on her shoulder. She would nurse me till her breasts ached and were completely empty. I wailed whenever she put me on the ground, which brought her more difficulty. She carried me on her back when she herded, collected dung, milked, and fetched water.

Father returned occasionally, and then left after a few hours. Sometimes Aunt Yangdrol, Mother's youngest sister, came and spent a few days to help Mother, who cried on her shoulder about her unfortunate life. Those visits were the only time Mother could rest a bit from her heavy work. But soon, Aunt Yangdrol would leave to care for her own family and Mother's break would be over. Even so, Mother swears she never regretted my birth. Slowly I stopped crying, maybe because I noticed her suffering.

Every day she left me in her bed, prostrated in front of the Buddha images in our tent, got kindling and dung from a tent corner, and kindled a fire as twigs crackled and smoke rose through the tent smoke hole into the sky. The tent warmed. The hearth of stone and adobe supported a large pot of water with tea leaves. She added milk when the tea boiled.

She had fifty yaks when she married. Father later took ten away and sold them. We never knew where the money went.

She never asked about the yaks and the money. Many people thought Mother was crazy. She milked the remaining yaks quietly without knowing if Father would drive another ten yaks away, and bring back nothing for us. Mother is a typically passive, traditional Tibetan woman, who says little, even when sad or depressed. She must have felt terribly alone and weak when Father wandered in the county town. I was a great help to Mother as I grew older and she loved spending time with me.

Walang, where my family lived, was then known for its fine milk yaks. Mother worried when I herded the calves on the wet hills. I ran after them crying hysterically if I could not catch them. We had many races and my clothes quickly became tattered in the wind and rain.

Herders were sometimes killed by lightning. Sometimes I even fell asleep on the mountains when it was sunny, like a wild thing, without fear or shame. Many people believe mountain deities may abduct you and blind you if you sleep on the mountains. Perhaps the mountain deities were not interested in me, or perhaps I was just lucky and they never caught me. I refused to be afraid, but Mother still worried and often came searching to see if I had fallen asleep on the mountains.

Mother made cheese and dried it outside our tent. We took a sheepskin carpet out of the tent and sat together by the drying cheese chanting scriptures.

Mother was satisfied when Father came home with sugar, vegetables, and pork given by his siblings. And I loved him because he brought me toys and candies that I never got from others.

I often lay awake listening, hoping to hear Father's footsteps, but the sounds I heard in reality were just the pounding of my heart, the rain, and the wind. I do not know if I loved candy more than I loved Father. He touched my head whenever I approached him and said, "Oh, my girl is getting taller." I loved to hear that. Maybe that is what you feel when someone you love shows you even a little affection.

I was a good girl. I helped Mother with her work and our neighbors no longer thought Mother was unlucky to have a daughter. I was also very mischievous and sometimes hit neighbor children with stones. This annoyed Mother, but she

was patient and was convinced that I would be a good girl in the end.

If it is true that the early bird gets the worm, Mother would likely have gotten many but, of course, Mother is not a bird and all she caught by rising early every morning was more work. She rose in darkness when the tall, jagged mountains stood still at the border of the grassland, observing the night. The mountain peaks were often white with snow, their pale outlines just visible in the starlight. Mother was too busy to feel the crispness of the cold or hear the deep stillness settling over the snow-covered mountains in the far distance. She worked like a beast of burden and felt a biting chill that gradually relented as she lifted, pushed, walked, and carried. Her heart pounded in the brightening morning as the rest of us slept. There were no witnesses to her struggle that kept us alive. Weeks and months passed. Grass turned green and then yellow. Snow fell and the wind howled. Later, cuckoos sang in bushes, announcing spring. There was no change in Mother's labor. A life with little help from anyone is extremely difficult. She suppressed her feelings deep inside and said nothing. Only the yaks understood how hard her life was.

Mother chanted scriptures and prostrated three times immediately after rising. She burned juniper in the hearth as an offering, so that the tent smelled nice and emanated a sense of closeness and warmth. Collecting dung and milking were next. Whenever I roused myself, I went with her to hold the calves so they would not nurse while Mother milked. The calves bawled and struggled to run to their mothers and I was not always strong enough to stop them. They were usually about my height, but some were bigger than me. I was angry that I was not strong enough to help Mother much because I knew she really needed help. I resented Father for being absent. He always returned but soon wandered away. I both loved and hated Father. I wanted him to consistently care for Mother and me.

Some mornings after we finished eating our simple breakfast of barley flour and butter tea, Mother went to town to buy supplies, leaving me at a neighbor's home. Sometimes it would take a day for her to return. I constantly ran from the neighbor's tent to our tent to see if Mother was back. After my

neighbor realized that I had fled, she ordered her son to bring me back to their tent and Uncle Dargye would spank me with a leather rope. He was the person I feared the most. Traditionally, fathers leave home to buy barley and other supplies. In our home, everything fell on Mother's shoulders. I often thought that if Father had been there to help Mother, Dargye, that terrible demon, would not have beaten me. I was not allowed to go far, but had to stay beside their tent peering into the distance, waiting for Mother's return.

"Your mother will be late. Go help your aunt herd the calves, you naughty girl," Uncle Dargye said sharply, glowering at me. I dared not say anything and knew I could not disobey, though my eyes kept jumping in the direction Mother's figure would appear.

"Aunt Dolma, when will Mother return? I miss her," I asked tearfully.

"She'll be back soon," Aunt Dolma, Uncle Dargye's wife answered kindly.

Once when she returned very late, I cried hard as I rushed toward her. "Mother, I imagined you had been eaten by wolves. I was frightened," I cried, hugging her tightly.

"Mother will never be eaten by wolves," she crooned. "Your mother is OK. There's no problem. Let's go home."

I knew Mother inside and out - the way she felt, and how she viewed the world. She was like a small stream on the boundless grassland on a long trip, helping everything it met. "Mother, are you tired? You have been out for a long time," I would ask, my sorrowful eyes hidden under lowered lids.

"No, I'm not tired, but Ngangra must be very tired. It was a long trip," she said, looking at our horse and patting its head. Ngangra had only one good eye. I never knew why. I asked Mother about it, but she said its eye became blind naturally. I was never satisfied with that answer - there are always many unknown mysteries for children.

"Did Aunt Dolma go to drive back our yaks?" she asked worriedly. Many yaks had been killed that summer. Uncle Dargye had seen a pack of eight wolves on the mountainside. Locally this news became much discussed. It was the first time so many wolves had been seen together, and people watched

their yaks more carefully. More than two herders were hired at a time by rich families to protect their yaks from wolf attacks. Meanwhile, poor families had to spend more time and effort by sacrificing other things.

"I didn't know that you had arranged that. Aunt Dolma stayed at home the whole day and made a carpet," I answered.

"Who went to herd today?" Mother asked, her eyes full of confusion.

"Sister Pedlha. I didn't see her all day," I answered quietly, ashamed of not being responsible for our own yaks.

"Oh!" Mother exclaimed and put me on the horse, as we quickened our approach to our tent.

Everything was damp and cold in the dim evening light. A cutting wind raced about the grassland, howling and giving the grass no rest. I strained my eyes, but could not see the earth, the tent, or the dim butter lamp. There was not a single soul anywhere except us; evening was as empty and lifeless as a desert. Soon, however, we neared our tent. I was surprised to see light inside. "Mother, who's inside our tent? Is it a demon? I'm afraid," I whimpered.

"Brother Basang is there. I asked him to watch the tent for us," Mother answered. Basang was a seven year old boy who lived near us until his family moved to their pasture. He was a wonderful helper. His family was very poor, with only ten yaks and two horses. He often helped rich families. He was kind and intelligent. Many people expected him to become a great lama, but he felt responsible for his family and wanted to help his parents. I liked calling him 'Brother' since I did not have any siblings at that time. His father had died when he was very young. I never asked how he died, even though I wanted to know. I knew it was hard to have no father; even harder than having an irresponsible father.

### 3

## GRANDFATHER

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Grandfather lived in Aunt's home. Mother had married and set up her own tent. Even though my grandparents did not live in my home, I still visited them. Grandfather favored me the most of all his grandchildren. I often went to Aunt's tent secretly without telling my parents. My grandparents were always happy to have me around. I liked to sit near the hearth. Aunt, Uncle, and Grandmother were there, but Grandfather was my favorite person in the whole world. He was honest and kind, and his deep patience was palpable in the lines of his face. He was a traditionalist who always wore a robe and boots. *Tsamba* and beef were his favorite foods. His smell was rich and pleasant, like the smell of hard labor and clean living in the open air.

"Grandfather was a bad man. He never helped me take care of our family. He was irresponsible," Grandmother said, recalling the past. I did not believe it because I had never seen him do anything bad. In my experience, his love was always the warmest and most dependable.

I spent years with Grandfather when I was, for the most part, wrapped warmly in his robe. Days and nights I curled and cuddled there, winter and summer, and he was never impatient. Instead, he acted like I was part of him. Moving with him as he walked after the yaks, held fast by the sound of his constantly murmured prayers, I grew into the rhythms of Tibetan life.

The yaks walked very far into the mountains, step after step after step in the endless ocean of grass under the boundless sky. In early spring, the horses were not strong enough after their long winter's fast, so we did not ride them. Grandpa paused in his prayers long enough while walking to explain how the horses were exhausted, just like we were in the late winter, and how they wanted food, just like we did. Talking this way, we passed the time all the way to the mountain on foot.

Grandfather was strong; a man from a long-gone time when people were tougher, far from the world of cars and roads. He never once said he was tired and I never felt cold inside his robe pouch.

"Doomlo, do you feel cold?" he asked constantly, snuggling me closer to him, my stomach against his, comfort and warmth filled my heart and mind; my whole body, head-to-toe, shorter than his torso above the sash of his robe. 'Doomlo' was a nickname he gave me. Everyone in my family called me that. I liked it - my childhood name, my most comforted self. Sometimes I fell deeply asleep in his robe if the weather was cold. He then chose slower, gentler steps so as not to disturb me. We stopped at times to build a fire and boil tea.

"Doomlo, are you hungry? Tea is ready. Let's eat *tsamba*," he said.

"I want to have a big piece of butter, the biggest one, please," I said shamelessly, and he put the biggest slab of butter into my bowl to mix with tea.

We had an old yak whose teeth were bad, making it hard for him to graze. Aunt wanted to keep him near the tent, but he always tried to follow the other yaks to the mountaintop. Grandfather fed him salt and *tsamba*. That yak liked Grandfather very much and slowly they built a relationship. The yak then stayed near our tent where Grandmother wanted him to be.

'Tsepal' was the short version of Grandfather's name used by the camp members. His full name was 'Tsewang Paljor', but not a single person called him that. A great lama in my area had named him when he was a baby. Many people said that he would be a great monk because claps of thunder, rainbows, and other auspicious portents manifested the day he was born, including birds flying around the tent, chirping melodiously. It was thought that even if he did not choose to be known as a lama in this incarnation, he would still help sentient beings. He had gone as a pilgrim to Lhasa on foot, a journey hardly possible for normal people, a very hard test and a source of merit the pilgrim shared with countless beings. A few men went with Grandfather, but they did not make it. Some died on the way and others died after reaching Lhasa. Grandfather was the



only one who returned. This was a tremendous achievement in a lifetime, gained through terrible hardship of ceaseless effort, month after month. Many say it is an honor to die in the course of such a pilgrimage, guaranteeing a good rebirth.

"Amnyi, why is pilgrimage so important?" I asked Grandfather.

"It purifies us from the sins we make because of selfishness and anger, and helps all beings escape the suffering of Samsara," he said and resumed murmuring prayers.

"Should I make the journey? How hard is it?" I asked.

"It is not hard if you have courage. Everyone can make it if they try. Actually it is a matter of confidence, patience, and courage. But you need not go to Lhasa for any long journey will purify you," Grandfather said. He was philosophical whenever I asked about religion. I did not understand these things, but I liked the sound of his voice when he said them. Still, I knew I was missing the point of such comments. I knew this had to do with the difference between older people and children. My child's brain seemed to be missing things that everyone else understood.

"Is pilgrimage the best way to obtain grace and peace?" I asked stupidly, using terms I had heard but did not really grasp.

"No, that is just one small step to a certain level of peace, and a little grace, but Buddha taught us many ways, so many ways, such as helping others, and being altruistic and compassionate," Grandfather said. He always explained patiently, no matter how silly my questions.

There were many stories about Amnyi Tsepal. My neighbors and Mother entertained us with them as we sat by the hearth. These stories mixed in my young mind with accounts of King Gesar until Amnyi's bravery and kindness became a model like the timeless Tibetan heroes of the past, but stories about Amnyi were better since Amnyi was someone we actually knew.

Mother told me this story one cold winter day as the sky was darkening and the air was taking on the feeling of rain:

Father was forty-six - a stocky, easy-mannered nomad. Father

and Mother were at home. Yangdrol had gone to the mountains to make charcoal<sup>1</sup> to sell for cash. Mother was chanting daily scriptures in the tent as usual. The milk-yaks were tied outside the tent with lines of rope that were made secure by two wooden stakes pounded into the ground. Father was petting a yak's back with his rough hands, gazing at the distant snow mountains, wishing something would appear.

He had heard a sparrow chirping by the tent that morning, a sign guests would come. The grassland was huge and, in the distance, even a giant boulder seemed no larger than a tiny pebble. Father kept looking, concentrating. Suddenly a figure appeared, first as a red spot, and then it slowly grew bigger. Later it became a monk, running breathlessly toward the tent. Father approached him as he reached the tent. The monk was around forty. Father wondered why he was so hurried.

"Akhe,<sup>2</sup> how are you? Where are you headed?" Grandfather asked kindly.

"Oh," Brother!" I am Tsering, from Kunub Monastery. Policemen are chasing me. Can I stay here for a few days?" the monk asked.

"Come in!" Father said and led the monk into the tent. Monks received a warm greeting from any family they visited, even though they were strangers. Mother stood as they entered. She was surprised and delighted to see a monk. You were lucky if a monk visited unasked. She got dung from the tent corner and built a fire.

"Why are the police chasing you?" Father asked.

"The local government says there can be no monks in my area. If there are, no matter young or old, they will arrest them all. I have been a monk for almost thirty years and now they want me to become a layman. Such tragedy," the monk

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<sup>1</sup> A large rectangular hole was dug in the earth, wood was cut and placed inside, a cover with a hole in it was made, the wood was ignited, and the hole was covered. After the wood burned for some time, dirt was placed over the hole. The resulting charcoal was a common local fuel.

<sup>2</sup> A respectful term for a monk.

said, shaking his head hopelessly.

"What is happening in this world? Unthinkable! They should be punished for doing this," Father said in a quivering voice, almost sobbing. "You can stay here as long as you like. They won't find you here."

"Thank you very much! May Buddha bless you!" the monk said happily.

After the tea boiled, Mother offered him tea in a bowl decorated with two dragons holding auspicious jewels.<sup>3</sup>

The monk stayed for about fifteen days. We offered the best food we had each day he was with us. He chanted for everyone in our family. He brought much good fortune to our family; the sick yaks were cured by this chanting.

Mother had a serious backache and whenever she felt pain, the monk beat her back very hard with a large scripture book he had brought from his monastery. Sometimes he put purified water in his mouth and sprayed it on Mother's back. She felt better when he did this. Neighbors didn't know we had a monk in our home at first, because the monk asked Father to keep it a secret. But later, the secret was revealed and people excitedly came to Father's tent to ask the monk to tell their future and to chant.

Most monasteries were far away from of our summer pasture. People rode for days to reach them. A few people walked there on pilgrimage. People believed they were very lucky to meet a monk in Father's tent and many came to listen to his teachings. Some old people stayed the whole day. This did not annoy Father. Instead he was happy, but worried that the local government would find out. The monk also worried that people might suffer because of him. Knowledge of his presence spread and increasing numbers of people came to listen to his chanting and talks.

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<sup>3</sup> Families usually have separate, very nice bowls for monks. Each family member had their own bowl and the bowls are not mixed. If a great lama leaves tea or food unfinished, we put it in our own bowls and drink or eat it, because a lama has a purified body and consuming what they leave prevents illness and brings luck.

"Uncle Tsepal, I really appreciate all the things you have done for me. I have received the best hospitality and I will pray for you as long as my life lasts. I have bothered you for a long while and I fear that bad luck will come to your family and everyone here if I stay longer. I have decided to go to India. I will leave early tomorrow morning," the monk said one day, looking sad and uneasy.

"It was no bother – in fact, it was an honor to have you here. We were so lucky. Thanks for paying so much attention to my family. I would love for you to stay longer and am grateful that you helped local people and my family, my great lama!" said Father, who bent and touched his head to the monk's feet three times.

"Oh, please, Uncle Tsepal, don't do this," said the monk.

"Please have tea," Father said, standing and pouring milk tea into the monk's bowl.

"Please don't tell the camp members that I'm leaving. I don't want to make them feel bad about my departure," the monk said.

"Of course, my lama," Father said.

That night all of our family chanted together before dinner. We were sad about the monk's departure. Mother was particularly sad.

"Here is the scripture. Beat your back with it whenever you feel pain," the monk said, handing it to Mother.

"Thank you. I am so sad you are leaving. You are the best thing that ever happened to our family," Mother said, her eyes teary.

"Your family is very kind to me. I really appreciate it," the monk said after a long pause.

Yangdrol cooked dumplings, a dish she made very well. Everyone went to bed after the nightly chanting. Smoke fled into the moonlight as the yaks chewed their cud ceaselessly, their big eyes sparkling in the moonlight. Stars glittered like brass nuggets above the pine forests that swayed wave after wave in the south. A gentle breeze blew, laden with the perfume of wild flowers. The night grew silent.

The monk left early in the morning before many

people woke up. He went on foot, planning to beg for food and tea until he reached India. Sadness and grief were written on everyone's faces.

Camp members came after we finished our breakfast to chant and listen to the monk's religious teachings. They were depressed when they learned he had left. Some old people wept. Their desire for teachings was very strong.

"Uncle Tsepel, why didn't you tell us he was leaving? We could have given him money and food," said Grandmother Zompa, our seventy-eight year old neighbor.

"Ani Zompa, I am so sorry, but he didn't want me to tell you and make you sad. He didn't want to receive anything," declared Grandfather.

"He did so much for us. He deserved something. My life became more meaningful after his arrival. I am so sad that he is gone," said Grandmother Zompa.

"Yes, such a great lama!" said Father after a long pause.

Yangdrol offered tea, but everyone refused, maybe because they were sad and depressed. They left in succession. Father's tent was soon silent.

"Mother, is it better to walk to Lhasa or to India?" I asked after she finished the story.

"They really don't compare. Many people have journeyed to Lhasa. Few have gone to India. There are more obstacles and it is harder to reach India. It is a long journey!" answered Mother.

# 4

## CATCHING TADPOLES

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Here are three, Doomtso! Come quickly!" shouted my friend, Dorje, from the other side of the pool. He held them in his small, dainty hands, his face brimming with glee and joy. I ran to him as fast as I could, afraid that they would swim away.

"Where? Let me see," I said, grabbing his shoulders in great excitement.

"Right here, near this grass. Can you see them?" he said, gesturing, his eyes shining.

"Oh, yes! I see them! Come, and let's catch them!" I said.

"Let's do it, otherwise they'll escape!" Dorje hollered.

Soon we were in the water. Our discarded cloth shoes were at the edge of the pool, covered with mud. It had rained the day before.

The pool near our family tent was my playground. We caught fish, insects, and tadpoles there, swam in it in the summer, and skated there in the winter. This pool was an important part of my life and brought me much joy.

We moved closer and slowly made our way through the mud the bottom of the pool. "Shh!" Dorje whispered. I nodded my head in agreement. We stood rigid and were close enough to see the tadpoles.

My friend winked and I knew what he meant.

*Splash!* Our hands were in the water.

"Catch anything?" asked my friend, our hands still in the water, searching.

"Nothing, my hands are empty," I answered.

"I think we lost them and the water is dirty," my friend said, removing his hands.

"Yeah. What should we do now?" I asked, taking my own hands out of the water.

"Let's sit on the grass. We'll come again after the water clears," Dorje said and together we moved to the side of the pool.

We sat on the grass by the pool, feeling fresh and joyful. A breeze brought the fragrance of flowers and summer grass, which was as overwhelming as being tickled or hugged. We sat looking lazily into the afternoon sun that dazzled our eyes. "The water is clear, let's try again," Dorje said and waded into the pool again.

Dorje's name had been given to him by a great lama. Some said he would be a great monk and that it was wrong for girls to play with him. But we were neighbors and the only children in the area. I knew great monks never killed, but Dorje enjoyed killing tadpoles and was expert at it. I thought he was not destined to be a great monk.

"OK," I answered. I circled the pool before I rushed in. Dorje was searching in the water with his hands.

"Doomtso, come. Here is a bunch of tadpoles - more than 500," called Dorje.

"More than 500? Really? I'm coming," I said. I wondered if he was telling the truth. I silently approached. There seemed to be thousands of tadpoles at the roots of the water grass. I was excited. My friend smiled, telling me that he had done a great job.

"Now, let's take off our jackets," whispered Dorje in my ear.

Slowly we took off our jackets. Dorje's expression was solemn. He counted on his fingers to three.

*Splash!* We grabbed the tadpoles in our jackets. Together we took them out of the water. They were full of big and small, tadpoles, all struggling. We did not release them from their pain and fear. We climbed to the pool edge and placed our jackets full of tadpoles on the grass by the pool. The tadpoles jumped, but after some time they stopped moving, and died. Dorje put them one by one in his hands and squeezed them until their bloody intestines squirted out. We killed hundreds of tadpoles.

"We can catch more tomorrow," Dorje said.

"I will bring the basket Mother collects dung in," I

suggested.

"Yeah, good idea. I'll bring one, too. I think we'll catch more than today," said Dorje squeezing some in his hands.

"They're all dead. Let's catch more," said Dorje and he stood up on one foot, afraid he would step on them.

"OK," I said and stood up, happy with his suggestion. Suddenly, something grabbed us from behind as we were wading into the pool.

"Ah!" we both screamed, sure we had been captured by a demon.

"Oh!" Dorje said and started to cry without turning his head to see the thing behind us. I was so terrified I dared not turn my head.

"You two demon children," said a voice behind us. I realized it was Mother. I turned my head, but Dorje did not. I thought he did not recognize her voice. I knew Mother was furious.

I pleaded, "Mother, don't beat me, please!" I did not know why she would beat me but I knew she was angry.

"Oh, Lama knows! *Om mani padme hum!*"<sup>4</sup> These two children took so many lives!" Mother said loudly, as though she wanted others to hear. She held our ears and dragged us home. We cried terribly all the way back. This was the first time I saw Mother so angry. I was terrified. She did not talk all the way home. I was sure she was going to beat us very hard. Mother released Dorje's ear at the door of our family tent. I thought she was going to beat Dorje, but she did not. He trudged off, sobbing noisily. Dorje was lucky. She let go of my ear and went into our tent, leaving me outside. I thought that she was getting the yak-skin rope she beat my bottom with when I was naughty. I was not sure why she would beat me this time. She wanted me to play with friends and not bother her when she milked our yaks. I wished Grandfather were there, because he did not allow Mother to beat me.

"Grandfather! Ah!" I whimpered and started sobbing.

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<sup>4</sup> *oM ma Ni pad+me hU~M* is a common six syllable mantra associated with Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.



Tears came whenever I was scared or sad. I waited.

"Why are you crying again?" Mother asked from the tent. I did not answer. I imagined she would appear at the door any second.

"Oh, come in," Mother called. I was afraid she would beat me if I went inside. With bent head, I finally entered the tent. It was extremely warm. I realized that she had not taken the rope. The rock in my heart suddenly became lighter. I raised my head and saw she was no longer angry.

"Look at your shoes! They're all wet. Come and change your shoes," she said, taking a dry pair from the wooden box.

I moved closer to the hearth. She handed me the shoes and a clean cloth that she had torn from an old robe.

"Clean your feet and put them on," Mother said in her usual manner. She placed a pot of water on the hearth. I quickly put on my shoes. I was then sure that she was not going to beat me.

"Don't kill tadpoles in the future. The dead tadpoles will go into your eyes and mouth while you are asleep," Mother said seriously.

"Really?" I said.

"Yes, sometimes if you kill many, they become very big and then they will come eat you," Mother said.

"Will they come into my eyes tonight?" I asked in a shaky voice.

"Maybe, if you killed many," Mother said quietly.

"Oh, Mother! I'm afraid. What should I do? I won't kill tadpoles again. What can I do to make them stay away?" I asked, my eyes full of tears.

"Don't cry. Chant for those tadpoles you killed and they'll leave you alone," Mother said, handing me her prayer beads. I was so afraid that I chanted the whole afternoon and into the night. I never killed tadpoles again. I also told Dorje, and he also stopped catching and killing them.

# 5

## YAK TAIL CUTTERS

---

**A**fter I was born, we moved to Walang. Mother told me many things about her home in Kunub. She said we had many relatives there who were very kind to us.

Mother did all the milking, cooking, and fuel collecting. I herded our calves on the summer pasture with local children whose families lived in tents far from my home, but we shared the same herding place. Since they came a long way to herd, they brought *tsamba*, butter, cheese, and a pot. They fetched water from a stream, boiled tea in the mountains, and ate *tsamba* happily. I always had to go home for lunch.

"Mother, can I take food with me like my herding mates?" I asked one day.

"You don't usually make *tsamba* on your own. How can you eat there without me?" Mother asked, looking into my eyes.

"You can teach me. I can learn, right?" I said.

"Yes," Mother said and taught me how to make *tsamba*. The first time I spilled half the *tsamba* on the ground, leaving only a little in the bowl. Mother did not like to waste hard-earned food. She told me a story:

Long ago, when people had a limitless amount of delicious food to eat, a mother was making bread while her son was defecating outside their tent. After the boy finished, the mother couldn't find anything to clean his bottom with, so she picked up a piece of bread and cleaned his bottom with that. The deities noticed, got very angry, and took away food from humans, only leaving some for dogs.

The food we have now is actually for dogs and if we don't cherish this food, the deities will take it from us.

I never wasted food again in fear the deities would take the food away and my family would starve.

Early the next morning, Mother prepared small leather bags of *tsamba*, cheese, and butter, and put them in a big leather sack with a small bag of dried meat.

"Share the meat with your friends," Mother said as I left the tent.

I carried the sack on my back and happily went to herd the calves on the mountain. My friends were very happy that I would eat with them. We usually had lunch around twelve-thirty, but the calves had scattered and we had a hard time finding a place where there was enough grass. At around two in the afternoon, we were hungry and tired.

"The food we eat when we are worn-out is really delicious," said one friend.

Some went to find dry dung, some went to fetch water, and others made a fire. It was the greatest lunch I have ever had. I had not realized eating on the mountains was so pleasant.

These happy times were short. My friends left to other summer pastures in search of better grass for the yaks after a few months. I was sad after they left. I then herded our calves by myself and stopped eating in the mountains.

Later, outsiders came to our place and somehow acquired use of a large tract of land, which local poor people could no longer herd on. If anybody came to herd near where they lived, they cut off the trespassing yaks' tails. Some said they had rifles. They were nearly all strong young men. People called them Sakag 'Land Stoppers'. We were afraid of them. This was the first time we had encountered people who were so violent.

Uncle Dedan came home one day and said, "Tsering Chotso, did you hear that six of Uncle Pedma's yaks had their tails cut off? A few days later they died. Their family was really sad about that. I think you shouldn't herd far away since your husband is not at home."

Mother then seldom sent me to herd the calves. If she went, she only went near our tent, trying to ensure our yaks did not go to the dangerous land.

A few weeks later, we heard these new people had left. Some said it was true, others said it was not, but nobody tried to go to the controlled land to investigate.

Soon, new neighbors came with many yaks and horses. They had two sons and two daughters. One son was a monk in India and the other was at home. One daughter had married and lived far away. The other daughter, Dolkar, lived with them. Mother was unhappy with their arrival, since we lacked enough land for herding, but was somewhat mollified when Dolkar said she would help me herd our yaks. Dolkar was around twenty and the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her bright white teeth reminded me of snow mountains. Her placid, sunny face made everyone smile when she smiled. I liked her and was grateful for her help.

With no new reports of the Sakag terrorizing our community, Mother decided to let me go herding with Dolkar. Early the next morning, Dolkar and I left to herd the yaks. We played as we herded and soon we were very far from where we should have been. We were unworried since we had never met anyone bad. She was pure and innocent and I was a child. The yaks happily ate fresh grass after we herded them to a place they had not been since the Sakag's arrival. The yaks frolicked, drank from a small stream, and soon were scattered here and there. We ignored them, knowing how much they missed fresh grass. We picked flowers and decorated our heads in between bouts of laughing and running.

"Two men are coming, Dolkar," I said, seeing two men dressed in thick robes approaching. Soon they were in front of us. Sister Dolkar ignored them. She was busy picking flowers. I pushed her and she looked up. We stood rigid, not sure what they wanted.

"This is our place. Don't you know you can't herd here?" one man said. He had long hair and was good-looking.

"We didn't know that, I'm sorry," I said.

"Do you know what the punishment is?" he asked.

"No, what is it?" Dolkar said.

"The punishment is to cut off the yaks' tails," he said.

"They are Sakag. Mother told me these people were violent and bad," I whispered to Dolkar.

She was afraid.

"Please, don't," Dolkar begged.

"We are poor and we only have these yaks," I added.

"OK, we won't cut off their tails, but you must agree to something," said the handsome man to Dolkar.

The other man then grabbed my hand and led me away, but not very far. I could still see Dolkar.

"Child, you don't know anything. Let's leave them alone. We'll pick mushrooms here. Later, take them home and cook them," said the man. He took off his hat and started to pick mushrooms.

My eyes remain fixed on Dolkar. They seemed to talk and then, suddenly, the man grabbed Dolkar around her waist and pushed her on the grass.

"Oh! Oh! No!" Dolkar screamed, and struggled with the wolf-like man.

"Sister Dolkar! Sister Dolkar!" I shouted and tried to run to her, but the other man stopped me.

"Where are you going? They're having fun. Don't interrupt them," said the man, stopping me.

I watched them and gathered mushrooms at the same time. The handsome man and Dolkar were rolled up in his big, thick Tibetan robe. Dolkar struggled to get out in the beginning, and then stopped. She breathed deeply and wept quietly. I did not understand what was happening, but I was worried since she was crying.

A short time later, they both stood. The man pulled his pants up in his robe and Sister Dolkar tidied her own robe. Her hair was a mess. She looked exhausted and weak. There was a big smile on the handsome man's face. He seemed very pleased. Dolkar walked to me with difficulty. She smiled at me as she came near.

"Are you OK, Sister Dolkar?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm OK. Let's go home," she said, tugging my shoulder.

The handsome man came near Dolkar and kindly said, "I'm so glad to meet you. Take your yaks back. I hope you'll come here tomorrow. I'll wait for you here."

Dolkar did not reply.

We drove the yaks back. Dolkar was quiet, kept her head down, and whispered to the yaks ahead of us. Usually she sang and laughed. I knew she was sad, but I did not know why.

She did not say good-bye to me when we got home. She just entered her tent. I drove our yaks to my own tent.

"Oh, you're back. I heard you were not herding nearby. Where did you go?" Mother asked curiously, as she built a fire.

"We went far away and met some Sakag," I answered despondently.

"Oh, really?" Mother asked anxiously, looking me up and down. She checked my hands and head to see if they had harmed me. When she found nothing wrong, she rushed out to check the yaks and then returned.

"You really met some Sakag? Why didn't they cut our yaks' tails off?" Mother asked, her bright eyes shining.

"They didn't cut off our yaks' tails. I don't know why, but Dolkar was sad all the way back," I said, looking at my shoes.

"Tell me what happened," Mother insisted worriedly.

I told her everything that had happened.

Mother cried when I finished. "Those dogs, those dogs," she said.

"Mother, why are you crying?" I asked.

"Nothing," Mother answered.

"Is Sister Dolkar OK?" I asked.

"Yeah, she's OK," Mother said strangely. "You stay here and tend the fire. I'll go check on Sister Dolkar," Mother said and left.

Mother came back after some time. Her eyes were red. "How's Sister Dolkar? What happened to her?" I asked.

"She's fine. Don't worry." Mother comforted. "You will not herd with Dolkar tomorrow," Mother said after a long pause.

"Why?" I asked.

"Her family's going to leave," Mother said.

"Why?" I asked and started to cry very hard.

"Because her relatives found better grass for the yaks in their place and they want your sister Dolkar's family to move there," Mother answered in a low, troubled voice.

"Who will herd with me?" I asked, feeling sad and angry.

"I will," Mother said.

Sister Dolkar's family left the next morning. Mother and I said goodbye to them. Sister Dolkar smiled before she mounted her horse but remained silent. My family decided to move to where Grandmother lived a few days later. Mother said we would find better grass there.

I saw Dolkar a few years later when I went to a horse race with Mother. She looked so old and wrinkled that I hardly recognized her. She had a little fatherless boy with her. I then understood what had really happened.

# 6

## BROTHER'S BIRTH

---

I was playing with my little cousin in front of our family tent. We put our old clothes on my family dog's newborn puppies that were so small and cute that we could not stop cuddling them. Mother and Aunt had gone to herd early in the morning as usual. Sometimes Mother said her pregnant belly felt really painful and we all thought she would give birth but, when she lay on her bed, the pain stopped. I became impatient whenever she said her belly hurt. Mother said the boy inside her stubbornly refused to emerge and then she resumed doing all her usual heavy work. Grandmother advised Mother to not herd, but she did not listen.

Aunt's family joined us and we maintained a close relationship on our summer pasture. My cousin became my everyday playmate. When the dog gave birth to her pups, Mother did not let us watch. She said it would hurt our eyes, and that we would become blind. For the first few days after the puppies were born, Mother said we should not touch them, otherwise they would become sick. Our family dog barked angrily at us if we touched her puppies.

"Mother, why is our dog so unfriendly after giving birth? She never bit me before," I asked, crawling on my hands and knees to sit by her side.

"She thinks you'll hurt her babies. Every mother loves her own babies, whether human or animal," Mother said thoughtfully.

"Mother, after my brother is born, can we touch him?" I asked curiously one afternoon as she was milking the yaks with her big belly.

"The baby is very weak for the first few days, but afterwards you can," Mother said, touching her belly gently.

I would sit next to her and look goggle-eyed at her belly while she chanted near the hearth.



"Don't sit on the wet grass, it's bad for the baby," Father would shout angrily.

"Oh," Mother would answer and sit elsewhere submissively. She thought that Father was expressing concern.

When Mother was pregnant with Brother, Father often came home to see if she had delivered. He yearned for a son. People in my home area say that a son loves his father and a daughter loves her mother. I did not love Father very much, not because he wanted a son, but because he did not care about me. Grandmother said Father did not come home because Mother gave birth to me - a girl. That really disappointed him and he started to wander around the county town all day. I used to get really angry with him, but later I realized most men wanted a son, not a daughter.

I was happy with Mother's pregnancy and wished she would give birth to a boy who would bring happiness and harmony to our family. Mother herded everyday during her pregnancy. Aunt helped in many ways. Mother was physically tired and exhausted, but she was happy. It was only during her pregnancy that she received care and love from Father, who brought baskets of eggs and pork every few days to help Mother build up her strength. Father often stayed at home to cook because he wanted to see his son. I have rarely talked to anyone about Father, because I did not love him dearly.

"Mother, are you happy that Father comes home often?" I asked her one night.

"Yeah, I'm happy, but it's only for a short time," she said, turning her head away.

I did not know why she said that and I did not ask. I thought she had done all that she could.

"What are you thinking? Help me with the dog," Cousin called, pulling me away from my deep thoughts.

"What's up?" I asked.

"The other puppy ran to its mother, can you find it?" Cousin said.

I ran after the puppy, but it was already happily nursing. I was afraid that its mother would bite me, so I came back.

"Where is the puppy?" Cousin asked.

"It's nursing. Why don't we let this one go nurse, too,

before the other one takes all the milk," I suggested, and Cousin agreed.

"What shall we play next?" Cousin asked, looking at me.

"I don't know," I said.

"How about making a bird's nest?" she said.

"It's summer, not winter. How can we play without dry grass?" I said. Making bird nests was a favorite winter game. We found plenty of dry grass in a small valley near our winter home. It had not been eaten by yaks since most families drove the yaks far away to the mountains. Some parts of the valley were very rocky and we did not often go there. Other parts had thick grass and small bushes, which was a child's paradise. We used small sticks to make small holes in the ground near the bushes and put dry grass inside. It was better if we put hair with the grass, which made the nest warmer and more realistic. In herding areas, most nests were in the ground since there were few trees. One friend made the most beautiful nests in the world and we admired him greatly because of this. We did not like it though, when he broke bird eggs, which he did whenever he could. This really annoyed the rest of us. Whenever we scolded him, he would smile and say that if he didn't kill them, somebody else would and that he would bear all the sins of killing by himself. And then he would laugh and run away.

"All right!" Cousin said. A moment passed and then she said, "When will your brother be born?"

"How do you know it's a boy?" I asked.

"Everyone wants a boy. I think they know that it's a boy," she said.

"Maybe, I don't know when it will be born. I have known about her pregnancy for a long time," I said feeling depressed.

Whenever I thought about Brother, I gazed into the blue sky at the moving clouds. I thought of all kinds of things. I wondered what it would be like to have a brother.

Brother was born in the Year of the Sheep on a very beautiful late afternoon, just at sunset. We could see people returning home after herding. Whooping and whistling sounded everywhere, as people brought their herds home. Grandmother looked through the tent door constantly while chanting

scriptures; Grandfather turned the prayer wheel at the back of the tent.

"They're late today. Is something wrong?" Grandmother asked, moving her beads back and forth with her thumb.

"Don't worry, they'll return soon," Grandfather said.

Cousin and I watched them, and said nothing. Grandmother looked worried and anxious but said nothing in the face of Grandfather's calm. She knew she over-examined everything. Grandfather said this was a problem with old people.

I never saw friction between Grandmother and Grandfather. I thought they were the happiest couple in the world - unlike my own parents.

"Grandmother Khado, your daughter is about to give birth! Come quickly!" a young man, our neighbor, said rushing into our tent.

"Where is she? Is she OK?" Grandmother demanded, her eyes wide open.

"She is here, on the horse. Sister Yangdrol is with her," said the young man and left. We all went outside and found Mother on horseback with Aunt Yangdrol riding behind her. They were galloping toward us.

"Prepare the bed, Mother!" Aunt Yangdrol shouted.

Grandmother ran into our tent and got the bed ready. Cousin and I stood rigid, not knowing what to do.

"Where's your father?" Aunt Yangdrol asked as they got near.

"I don't know," I answered.

"Come, help me hold the horse," she said and dismounted.

Mother was pale and tired. We helped her from the horse to her bed. Grandfather and the young man waited outside the tent.

"Boil water," Grandmother said to Aunt Yangdrol.

"Yes," she said and started kindling a fire. Grandmother knelt on a grass mat where Mother was lying, wiped sweat from Mother's forehead, and smoothed her brow. Mother cried out repeatedly. All our neighbors soon gathered outside our tent. They were worried and nervous. Mother screamed when the

pain was unbearable. Cousin and I stood by the door. We were frightened. Grandmother said children could not go near Mother.

"Here's water, Mother," Aunt Yangdrol said, placing a clean cloth and hot water by Mother's bed.

"This is her second child. It will be much easier," Grandmother said.

"Come, try harder," Grandmother said, but Mother only cried and screamed louder.

I had seen yaks give birth but not women. Yaks can give birth while standing and I did not hear them cry in pain. After the calf was born, its mother licked it gently. I thought there was no pain when yaks gave birth. Later, Grandmother said yaks felt great pain when giving birth, but there was no way for them to express it. I never knew giving birth was so hard and painful.

The pain continued, hour after hour. Mother suddenly groaned louder and with a loud cry, Brother was delivered into Grandmother's waiting hands.

"It is the boy we all hoped for," Grandmother said to Mother. She smiled happily, though her knees creaked from the long hours she had spent squatting near Mother.

"Is he OK?" Mother asked in a low voice, full of pain. She was too tired and weak to lift herself up to see Brother.

"Yes, he's fine," Grandmother said, wrapping him in a soft sheepskin robe Mother had started making the day she knew she was pregnant.

Father rushed into the tent as soon as he heard the baby's cry. "Oh, my son! Father is here. Look at me!" Father said, holding Brother in his big arms.

Aunt Yangdrol went outside to tell everyone that Mother and the baby were fine. My relatives pushed each other to see Brother better.

Customarily, we did not allow outsiders to look at a newborn baby until it opened its eyes, especially boys, but relatives were exceptions.

Mother rested in bed for two days after the birth. Father stayed at home to help Mother tend Brother for a few days, but soon he got bored and wandered to the county town as usual.

Grandmother said hair would grow on stones and flowers would bloom in the sky when Father really understood how to care for his own family. I didn't know what she meant.

Grandmother was right. Happy times were short-lived.

## VISITING A SACRED MOUNTAIN

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My bed was wet from the rain and I could not sleep. Tents leak in heavy rain. Mother was busy the whole night, covering the upper part of the tent to prevent rain from entering. I looked around to see if she was sleeping, but I could not see her anywhere. She had already gone to collect yak dung for fuel. Father and Brother were still in bed. They were heavy sleepers. Only Mother got up early. I peeped out of the tent and was excited to see a double rainbow. I rushed out of my wet bed and put on my cloth shoes. My clothes were so wet that I did not try to put them on. I put them in a tent corner and took dry clothes from the wooden box covered with leather Grandfather had given Mother when she got married. I wondered if it was OK to wear new clothes without Mother's permission. As soon as I got into dry clothes, I rushed outside to see the rainbows. Grandmother said if you see a double rainbow in the morning, your whole life will be happy and prosperous. I had always hoped to see a double rainbow. It seemed near enough to grasp in my hands. I had never seen anything so beautiful and so colorful. It seemed to be a colorful bridge beckoning me to Paradise.

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A lama came to our home area a few days later. He could tell the future and detail what unfortunate things would happen to you. My family took me and Brother Lhodrul to see him. He was older than any monk I had ever seen in my life. Grandfather said old lamas were very knowledgeable and wise. I absolutely believed whatever Grandfather said. The old lama sat in a very high place so everyone could see him. People took turns asking about their future, what misfortune would befall their families, was there a way to solve such problems, and so on. I held Mother's hand while Father held Brother Lhodrul,

who looked around curiously, his small eyes resembling rotating balls. We waited for about thirty minutes and then it was our turn. Many waited behind us. Father and Mother bent their heads in front of the lama and then knelt.

"Great Lama, please tell us the misfortune of our family, and if there is a way to solve such problems," Father said politely.

"What are you and your wife's names?" the great lama asked patiently. Father replied and bent his head again. The lama slowly took his beads and closed his eyes, pushing different beads back and forth constantly in deep concentration. He opened his eyes slowly a bit later and said earnestly, "Your life will not be very difficult, but a few unpleasant things will happen, though I cannot tell you exactly what they are."

"How might we solve this?" Mother asked.

"Invite monks to your home to chant scripture for five days and if there is time, chant as much as you can. That will be very good for your family," said the lama thoughtfully.

"Thanks, my great lama. This is my daughter and this is my son. Can you see misfortune in their lives?" Mother said, pushing me closer to the monk, and making me bow.

The monk asked our names and did what he had done before. "Your daughter will be very sick when she is nine," said the monk.

I was terrified. Mother moved closer to the monk and asked nervously, "Please, is there a way to solve that?"

"Your family should visit Gyalmo ngodor Mountain, offer much liquor and butter, and pray to Buddha there. Then she won't be sick. Your son will have some difficulties in the future, but he can deal with them. Don't worry," said the monk.

A decision to visit the special mountain was soon made. I was really happy, not only because I would be free from sickness, but I also would have the chance to visit a distant place. I was happy about the good omen that the rainbow brought. "I'm lucky, because Buddha is helping me," I thought, joy flooding my heart.

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I had many questions about the rainbow. "Is there any way for

me to know more about it? Does Grandmother know how a rainbow is made?" I wondered.

The air around me was fresh after a whole night's cleansing rain. Sunshine beamed on the wet grass, making it blaze softly. Millions of dewdrops gently quivered on grassland flower petals, like countless glimmering pearls. Birds flitted here and there, making a commotion in the nearby bushes. Little birds piped shrilly from the hillsides. I was intoxicated by the bird songs and the flowers' fragrance. Suddenly I remembered the rainbow but when I turned to see it, it had vanished. I was sad to have ignored it.

Mother was singing a mantra in the distance, its familiar, gentle melody wafting about us. Mother sang mantras every morning in a tender, mellow voice. Slowly she came toward me in the distance, an increasingly discernible figure, carrying a big basket of yak dung.

"What are you doing here? Did you see the rainbow? I think our visit to the special mountain will be very meaningful," said Mother, smiling.

"Yes. It was gorgeous," I said, following her into the tent. She cleaned the hearth and built a fire. She took water from a wood bucket with a ladle; washed her hands and face; went to a corner of the tent; filled seven bowls of water, and placed them and offered butter lamps in front of the shrine. Mother filled the bowls every morning and later discarded the water at around five in the afternoon. One butter lamp lasts a few hours. When she finished, she called Father to get up, and then we soon had breakfast.

"Yes, finished," I said a few minutes later, *tsamba* still in my mouth.

"Go tell Uncle Dargye that we are ready to go," Mother said. I did as I was told.

Uncle Dargye's tent was nearby. I found three horses packed when I arrived. I entered the tent, and found they were ready to leave. Their smallest child was in his mother's robe pouch, smiling at me. I told Uncle Dargye what Mother had said and left. When I returned to our tent, Father had already packed small leather bags and tied them to our two horses. Mother and I rode one. Father and Brother rode the other. That's



how we started our journey.

Getting to the special mountain took five hours of riding - my first long ride.

"Mother, are we almost there?" I asked after a few hours of riding. It was already one in the afternoon and I was hungry and impatient. Mother took some bread from a bag, gave it to me, and said with a smile, "I know you're hungry."

I really liked Uncle Dargye because he was my family's protector. All the neighbors respected and liked him. He was brave and had a gun that scared thieves away. Whenever thieves came, he brandished the gun, which frightened them away. We never had to worry about thieves. "Your father is big and strong, but he never scares the thieves," people said and laughed.

"Because Father has no gun, that's why they aren't scared of him. It's not because they think he's a coward," I would reply angrily.

"What time is it now?" I asked Mother.

"Are you hungry again?" asked Uncle Dargye with a big smile.

"Of course not, I just want to know when we will reach the mountain," I said.

"We'll be there soon. We can cook there, so don't worry," he said and then resumed chatting with Father.

We were surrounded by snowcapped mountains ornamented with trees at their lower reaches. It was the first time I had seen so many trees. We went deeper into the valley and could hear water greeting us and see flowers laughing.

Grandmother and Grandfather said the special mountain was very holy and famous monks had meditated there. We saw handprints in stone left by enlightened lamas. Worshipping at the mountain could help one reduce the sins of one's life, bring good luck, and help one avoid misfortune.

"We have arrived. This is the sacred mountain. We should dismount and leave the horses here. We can proceed on foot. The horses are exhausted," said Uncle Dargye.

"Mother, how high is the mountain? How long will it take to reach the top?" I asked, looking at the mountain. I could not see the top because it was covered with clouds and I wondered if the top could be reached.

"Ask Uncle Dargye," said Mother.

"There is no way to reach the mountaintop. This mountain is the way to Paradise. It's very hard for mortals to reach the top. It would take a lifetime to do so," Uncle Dargye said thoughtfully.

"What is mortal, Uncle Dargye?" I asked, my eyes shining.

"Oh, mortal means ordinary people," answered Uncle Dargye, patting my head gently.

"Are we ordinary people?" I asked.

"What do you think? Do you think we are ordinary or extraordinary?" Mother asked.

"I think we are extraordinary," I said confidently.

"Why?" asked Father, surprised by my answer.

"Because we're going to climb this mountain! I'm sure we'll get to the summit and reach the gate to Paradise," I said, imagining how splendid Paradise must be.

There was a big river at the foot of the mountain that Mother called Gyalmo Ngochu, the longest and biggest river in the area. We had to cross it then take a small path leading to the mountain. We hobbled the horses so they could graze and not wander away.

The water raged below. A small bridge spanned the river that seemed so deep you would never find the bottom and surely die if you fell in. Local people had built a wooden bridge. I cannot imagine how they built it. It was very old and there were gaps everywhere. Parts of the bridge flooring were rotten. You had to watch your step or risk plunging into the river below.

Uncle Dargye stepped first on the bridge, carrying our food and other things we had brought from home. He had been here a few years earlier. Mother held Brother and followed Uncle Dargye. Father held me and we followed Mother. Aunt Pedlha brought up the rear, holding her three-month-old son in her robe pouch. I gripped Father's clothes tightly and dared not open my eyes. I was sure water would sweep us away. The bridge seemed endless. I could feel Father's heart throbbing as his anxious steps moved carefully forward. I moved my head close to Father's chest and held him more tightly. Suddenly I

detected a familiar odor, a smell that had always been there for me and had helped me pass many cold winters. It was from Father's sheepskin robe. Mother had wrapped me in this robe for years, which kept the cold at bay. Suddenly a special warmth held me, dispelling all my fears. I was no longer afraid. I knew Mother and Father's love would remove all danger. I became relaxed and calm.

"We made it, thanks to Buddha. *Om mani padme hum*," Mother said. I opened my eyes and yes, we were across.

Father put me down and said approvingly, "Doomtso was so brave, she didn't move at all." I knew it was he and Mother who were brave. Aunt Pedlha arrived with her infant who was now wailing. I offered to hold him, but Mother said I would drop him. There was a small Bon monastery at the foot of the mountain. We believe in the Gelug Sect of Tibetan Buddhism, so we did not go there. We saw many monks and we also noted many old people turning prayer wheels in a counterclockwise direction, which surprised me.

"Mother, why do they turn wheels like that? They are making a mistake," I said.

"No, they are not wrong, it's just different. Some people turn it this way and some people turn it in the opposite direction," said Mother and followed Uncle Dargye. A few old women were selling prayer flags, wind horses, and juniper for incense offerings by the path. We put our belongings down and they agreed to watch them until we returned. They were delighted when we bought something from each of them.

The mountain path was so narrow that we could only proceed in single file. I was first, since I had announced I wanted to reach the peak. I felt like I was the leader, taking us all to Paradise. Bushes grew between rocks. Tiny white blossoms were opening. They were invisible if you did not look closely. Prayer flags were everywhere, draped from bush to bush, like colorful spider nets covering the mountain. Countless wind horses were in every corner of the area. You could easily step on them. We do not step on books, or anything with writing, especially religious material, so as we ascended the mountain we carefully avoided stepping on wind horses. At the beginning I was first, but I grew tired and then became the last.

"Oh, little girl, what happened? You're the one who will reach the top and lead us into Paradise. Now, go to the front and lead the way!" said Father.

"No, Father, it's too hard. I can't. This is not like the mountains I'm used to climbing," I said looking everywhere for a place to sit. I was panting and breathless.

"This is our destination," Uncle Dargye said finally, just as I was nearly dead from exhaustion. We had stopped near a big stupa.

Mother said there was an image of a Buddha inside. Thousands of prayer flags surrounded it. Omnipresent, fluttering, various-colored prayer flags reminded me of the rainbow I had seen. I looked up but could not see the mountaintop because it was lost in swirling clouds. Uncle was right - the mountain had no top. I realized I was ordinary and that if you wanted to reach the top, you had to be extraordinary. I turned to Mother and the others. They circumambulated the stupa, and then went to burn the juniper we had bought on the way. Mother said that the odor of the smoldering juniper went directly to Paradise and Buddha would smell it.

"Doomtso, come here," called Mother.

I ran to her.

"Burn some juniper, circumambulate the stupa, and then you will never be sick," Mother said and I obeyed. The smoke wafted heavenward. I was sure Buddha could smell it. I circumambulated the stupa 150 times. Mother watched me, nursed Brother, and smiled in a way I had not seen for many days.

"Oh, Doomtso! You must go to the mountaintop, right?" said Uncle Dargye. Mother and the others laughed. I put my head down and said nothing. I was embarrassed to have been so unrealistic.

After our offerings and prayers, we decided to descend the mountain. I was really happy. I was sure sickness would now never afflict my life. We slowly descended and met other visitors coming up. When we reached the foot of the mountain, we thanked the old women who had watched our belongings. We then found a flat open place, built a fire, borrowed a teapot from a family near the Bon monastery, and had a meal. We all

contentedly sat by the fire cross-legged. Jokes were made during the meal about the things I had said about the mountain: ordinary, extraordinary, Paradise...

# 8

## LOSAR

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Most local people celebrate Losar - the Tibetan New Year - beginning with the first day of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar. Everyone busily prepares for Losar ten days before its arrival, buying food and clothes, cleaning their homes, and preparing to visit relatives. Joy and excitement fill the air during the fifteen days of the Losar period. People wear new clothes and enjoy the best food available.

Mother went to the township town every day to buy things when we were herders. Father brought pork, fruit, and vegetables from his home in the county town where most of his close relatives lived. We celebrated New Year in our winter house made of stone and mud. Grandmother was our neighbor at that time and a few other families lived near us. Some were Grandmother's relatives and some were people we had known for a long time. Mother, Father, Uncle, and Aunt went to the township town together to purchase many things for Losar. Children and elders stayed at home and waited for their return. I was really happy during Losar and waited impatiently at home.

"Mother, what have you got in your bag? Any candies for me?" I asked when Mother returned.

"Here are a few. You can eat the rest during Losar," she would say, handing some candies to Brother and me and putting the rest in a wooden box.

"When is Losar? When I can eat them?" I asked.

"Two days from now. It will come soon." Mother said, smiling.

"Where is Father? Did he return with you?" I asked.

"We went to buy things together, then he bought a bus ticket and went to the county town," she said.

"For what? Is he not coming home, even during Losar?"

I asked angrily.

"He will come home by tomorrow night," she said.

"Will you go to the township town tomorrow? May I go with you?" I asked.

"We have bought everything we need, so we aren't going," she answered. She was making butter from the morning's milk. She usually made butter as soon as she finished milking, but because she had to go to the township town every day, she had to do it after she returned.

"Tomorrow we must clean the house, make cheese cake,<sup>5</sup> and cook the ninth noodles," she said.

"The ninth noodles?" I said.

"People cook noodles on the evening of the twenty-ninth day of the twelfth lunar month to celebrate the coming of the New Year," she said, taking butter out of the yak-skin churning bag. Many families were poor and churned butter manually. A few rich households had bought mechanical churns, but most people still used the old ways since the machines were expensive.

"Mother, are we going to kill yaks for Losar?" I asked.

"Why? Did Father say we are?" she asked, looking at me strangely.

"No, but this morning I saw Uncle Wangchen kill a yak for Losar," I said. Wangchen's home was very near ours.

"Who did the killing? You went there?" she asked.

"Uncle Wangchen. I saw a knife in his hand," I answered.

"*Om mani padme hum! Om mani padme hum!* Pity the yak," she said, getting some dung from where we tied the calves.

"We will not kill a yak for Losar," Mother continued.

"Really? I thought every family killed one for Losar," I said.

"Some do, some don't. We won't, because I raised our yaks with tears and sweat. They're like my relatives and I pity

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<sup>5</sup> Made by mixing a generous amount of butter with *tsamba* and dried cheese, and letting it set. Other items may be added, e.g., sugar, candies on top, jujubes, and so on.

them," she said.

I said nothing. Mother had deep feelings for yaks built over years of herding, so of course she would not send them to their death.

I woke up the next morning and found Mother busy sweeping the courtyard - sweeping away the dirt of the old year so that we could welcome the new one. I thought it must be the twenty-ninth day of the month.

"Mother, did you drive the yaks to the mountain?" I asked.

"Yes, I did already," she answered.

"What about the calves?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"How can I help you?" I offered.

"We will make cheese cake and *gyoma*<sup>6</sup> cake after breakfast," Mother said.

Mother and I busily cleaned every corner of the house after breakfast. Every household was busily preparing for Losar. Everyone smiled, especially children.

There was a high wall between my home and Aunt's. Cousin and I once made a hole in the wall to peer through and see each other's house. Cousin gave me candies through the hole whenever she got some and I did the same.

I did not go out to play with friends that day because I was busy helping Mother make cheese cake and *gyoma* cake. I thought maybe my friend and her family were doing the same thing.

Mother is a skilled cook. We made fried bread, one of my favorites; several cheesecakes and *gyoma* cakes; and other traditional Tibetan foods.

"Mother, why do you make so many cakes? Can we finish them all?" I asked, putting the cakes in a drawer where we normally put bowls.

"We won't eat them all. We'll take a few cakes to pay a customary visit to our relatives who live far away and offer good wishes for their health and longevity," she said, washing her hands in a basin.

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<sup>6</sup> Small, edible wild roots.



"Where are our relatives? Do we have other relatives?" I said, thinking Grandmother's family members were our only relatives.

"Of course we have other relatives, but they live far from here, on the other side of the mountain. We visited them when you were very little. It took a day to get there. Maybe you don't remember," she said.

"No, I don't remember," I said, feeling ashamed to not know my own relatives.

"Will they visit us?" I asked.

"Yes, they visit every year," she said.

"When?" I asked.

"I don't know. We will visit them early," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"It is more polite to send gifts first, otherwise it seems you are waiting for their visit. Then you are taking something in return when you make your visit," she said.

"Who will go there?" I questioned.

"Your father will, because he hasn't visited them for a long time. I think he should go, maybe on the second day of Losar," Mother said.

I wanted to go if Mother was going to visit them, but I would consider it more if Father went.

"If you have questions, I can answer later. It's late now and we will cook the ninth noodles together with Aunt's family. Go ask her whether we should cook here or in her house," Mother urged.

I rushed outside without answering, and ran straight to Aunt Yangdrol's house. I found her busy cleaning the ceiling. Grandfather was chanting scriptures on his bed. Grandmother was turning a prayer wheel by the warm hearth.

"Mother asked where we should cook the nineteen noodles," I said.

"What's nineteen noodles?" Aunt Yangdrol asked, laughing merrily, followed by Grandmother and Grandfather's chuckles.

"I mean the nineteen noodles that we cook tonight. Don't you know about that!?" I said with irritation.

"Oh, you mean the ninth noodles! It's not called

'nineteen noodles'," Aunt Yangdrol said, correcting my mistake.

"It is almost the same - some kind of nine noodle," I said unhappily.

They laughed again.

"OK, tell your mother to come and we will cook here together. Tell her that she needn't bring anything. We have everything here," Aunt Yangdrol said.

I ran back home and said, "Mother, Aunt said we will cook in her house."

Father was not home. Mother stoked the fire. The house felt warm and smelled like milk and sugar.

"Oh, did she say that? I thought we would cook here in our home, so I boiled milk tea," Mother said.

"Yeah, she also said don't bring anything. They have everything to cook the noodles," I said happily.

Mother took the teapot and we went to Aunt Yangdrol's home. The sun had already set.

"Mother, who'll drive our yaks back from the mountain?" I asked.

"Your cousin and your uncle will drive ours and their yaks back. I asked him this morning," Mother said.

Aunt Yangdrol had already prepared a big pot on the stove for cooking. She was chopping beef in a corner of the room. Mother placed our teapot on the stove.

"Where is Padyang?" Grandmother asked.

"He's not back yet," Mother answered.

"Where did he go?" Grandfather asked.

"He went to the county town yesterday. I think he'll be back soon," Mother said.

"That bastard! He doesn't come home early even during Losar!" Grandmother complained. She was really angry with Father. She hardly ever scolded him since he was not her own child, but this time I could sense true anger in her blood.

Different things are put in the noodles that we cook on the twenty-ninth night, which we call ninth noodles. After the noodles are almost cooked, we add dough figures that resemble a rabbit, a hero with an arrow, the sun, the moon. Some dough also has grass and salt inside. If you get the rabbit in your bowl, it means you are smart; the hero with an arrow means you are

brave; the sun means you help many people; the moon means you are arrogant and never care about poor people; grass means that you are someone who changes their opinions just like the grass on top of a dirt wall changes direction with the wind blows; and salt means that you get along easily with others.

Father returned just as we finished cooking. He sat by the hearth and we ate the ninth noodles together. I got the sun and the hero with an arrow that night, meaning I was brave and helpful.

On the thirtieth day, Father and Uncle Samkho went to the mountain with our best horses to make offerings to our mountain deity to ask for protection for our yaks and family.

"Tomorrow you must get up very early and fetch water for our family. We call this *tsechu*," Mother said.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Tomorrow is the first day of Losar. If you start the first day of the New Year with something good, you will be lucky and healthy the whole year. The water we fetch tomorrow will bring luck and happiness to our family. This year it is your turn to fetch it," Mother explained.

"When should I get up?" I asked.

"Around five. The earlier the better. I'll prepare a *khadak*<sup>7</sup> for you to tie on your bucket," Mother said and went to find one.

I looked around. Father was snoring. Everything looked so fresh and new around the room. Losar is wonderful!

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<sup>7</sup> Auspicious strip of silk.

## MARMOT CATCHERS

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The wind howled. The earth was covered with dark, ominous clouds. The sun had vanished. A few minutes later the mountains nearby disappeared in the cold air. Even the yaks scattered on the mountain were no longer visible. The dogs trotted around the tent corner, their shoulders hunched as they howled. "*Om mani padme hum*" filled the air as old people chanted frenziedly.

"Grandmother! Will it rain?" I asked from a tent corner, looking at her.

She put her scriptures down and peered into the dark sky through the flap of the tent. She predicted the weather very accurately based on the clouds' movements and shapes. "No, I don't think it will rain, but I feel doom in the air. Today's weather is very unusual," she said, and then picked up her scriptures and resumed chanting. I put my toys near Grandmother and stood, wiggled into my warm sheepskin robe, and started outside. As soon as I made my first step, Grandmother demanded, "Where are you going? I don't think you should go out now. This kind of weather means bad luck. Don't go out."

"Grandmother, I'm only going to see if Aunt Yangdrol is returning from herding," I said and made my second step.

"You don't need to check if she's coming. She'll get here when the time comes!" yelled Grandmother and ordered me back to my seat. Suddenly a crafty idea came to me. I moved my bottom slowly to the place where I could crawl out on my knees and elbows under the bottom of the tent without Grandmother noticing. I was a little afraid, but I made it. My heart beat faster than usual. It was not raining, but it was chilly. I wrapped myself tightly in my robe. The tents and bushes were a blur in the distance, like a photograph negative. I went farther but I did not see Aunt anywhere. Slowly, I walked through

some bushes. Sleeping birds flew up, their wings flapping in the air making a sound that terrified me. I walked on, but still did not see Aunt Yangdrol. I then noticed a crowd at the entrance of Uncle Nyima's tent. They seemed very serious.

I moved closer and heard Aunt Pedkar say, "Yeah, I saw them coming with picks, shovels, and hammers."

"Did you see in which direction they went?" asked Uncle, inhaling and exhaling frequently.

"They aren't far from here. They had bags on their backs, which made it hard for them to go quickly. They will stay somewhere near," said Aunt Pedkar, placing her basket of dung on the ground.

"What? What? What's going on here?" Grandfather Sotse asked, joining the group.

"Oh, Uncle Sotse! Pedkar says strangers have come. We don't know why they're here," answered Uncle Dondup, who then went into his tent, came out with a small wood box, and asked Grandfather Sotse to sit on it.

"Do you think they're gold miners, like those that came here before?" asked Grandfather Sotse, moving his prayer beads back and forth repeatedly.

"Something like that, because they have tools," Pedkar said.

"Dorje, go check where they will camp, then we'll see why they are here," said Grandfather in his fatherly voice. The talk ended. I stood still, not knowing what to do.

"Doomtso, go home. It's very cold here," suggested Aunt Pedkar, awakening me from a deep trance.

"Yes," I answered and ran back to Grandmother's tent. I was afraid Grandmother would scold me because I had left the tent without her permission, but I was also delighted and excited that I had news to share.

"Grandmother! Grandmother!" I called at the tent entrance, and then rushed inside without hesitation. Aunt was already in the tent, making dinner.

"Oh! You naughty girl! Where did you go? I was really worried!" said Grandmother, who grabbed me with her warm hands.

"Oh, Grandmother. I'm OK. Nothing happened," I

replied quickly.

"Where did you go?" asked Aunt.

"I have shocking news from Aunt Pedkar. She saw strangers in our place and Uncle Nyima, Grandfather Sotse, and some others were talking about it," I announced proudly.

"What people? Why are they here? Where are they from?" Grandmother demanded.

"Aunt Pedkar said maybe they are gold miners, but nobody knows where they are from or why they are here. Grandfather Sotse asked Dorje to figure out what they are here for," I answered.

Grandmother patted my head and said, "You naughty little girl. Is that your exciting news?" and laughed loudly.

The following day, I was in bed, a yak skin rug under me and a sheepskin robe wrapped tightly around me. I was fully awake. The tent was warm from the fire. The warmth and smell of boiling milk comforted me. I heard the sound of wood being cut outside and wondered who was doing it. I looked around and did not see Aunt. I guessed she had gone to herd the yaks. I turned my head and as I removed the robe that had kept me warm for the night, I saw Grandmother prostrating in front of the Buddha images in the tent. She murmured something I had not heard before. She took a butter lamp from the wooden box, which she had made a few days earlier, placed it on the shrine in front of the Buddha images, and lit it. I was surprised because we usually only offer butter lamps when it is a special day and I knew this was not a special day.

"Grandmother, why are you offering a butter lamp? Is today special?" I asked, putting on my robe.

"No, today is not special, but Buddha will always help us whenever we need it," Grandmother said in a low, troubled voice.

"What happened? Grandmother, you sound strange. Is something wrong?" I asked nervously. I had never heard Grandmother speak in this manner.

"Uncle Dorje visited last night and said Han people have come here. Nobody is sure what they are going to do. Everyone worries that they will bring trouble," said Grandmother. She turned her head toward the shrine and resumed chanting. I tidied

up my bed and left the tent. Uncle had finished cutting the wood and I helped him carry the wood into the tent.

"Uncle Samkho! Where is Aunt Yangdrol?" I asked.

"She went to herd. She'll be back soon. After breakfast, go home and tell your father to come here. The men will have a meeting," said Uncle. I nodded and placed *tsamba* in Grandmother, Uncle, and my bowls. After breakfast I ran back to my tent. I saw Mother with a big bucket of water on her back as soon as I reached the tent flap. We entered the tent together. Brother was still deep asleep. I helped Mother put the bucket on the ground.

"How was your stay in Aunt's home? You don't usually return so early. What's Grandmother doing?" asked Mother.

"Grandmother is fine. Uncle Samkho told me to tell Father to come to his tent. The men will discuss something important. Where is Father? Didn't he return from town?" I asked.

"Yes, but he was called to Uncle Dorje's home this morning," Mother answered.

"When will he be back?" I asked.

"I don't know. Soon, I think. Did you say they will have a meeting? Why?" Mother asked.

"I don't know. I heard there are strangers here. Uncle Dorje and others are going to find out why," I said.

"Strangers? What do you mean by strangers?" Mother asked.

"I heard they are Han Chinese or something; like the people we see in town, who speak a strange language," I said.

"Right!" Mother said. "Did you eat? Do you want me to make *tsamba* for you?"

"No, I have already eaten," I said.

"Go tell your uncle that your father went to see Uncle Dorje and ask him to go there too. I'll go there now," Mother said.

"OK," I said and did as I was told. It was already noon. I moved reluctantly toward Aunt's tent. The wind was howling ominously, the sky was darkening, and the air was taking on the feel of snow. My shoes were soaked. I couldn't see anyone. Fear crowded out my little aches and pains. My lungs constricted,

making it difficult for me to breathe. I almost cried. I felt thousands of hands coming toward me, trying to grab me. I heard constant barking in the distance, further adding to my discomfort. I moved faster, continually looking back and forth. Fear sprang up inside me, and Aunt's tent seemed thousands of kilometers away. Finally I arrived. I relaxed, and then rushed into the deadly silence of the empty tent. Even the dog was gone. Fear captured me as I wandered around, utterly at a loss, then thinking that Aunt and Uncle might come but, when they did not, I decided to go to Uncle Dorje's tent. When I got there, I was surprised to see all the camp members there.

"Yes, I saw them killing the marmots and skinning them. How cruel!" Tsering Lhamo said, sobbing convulsively, making it hard for her to speak properly.

"Oh, my Buddha! How evil!" Grandmother said, her head bent, and then she started chanting.

"What else are they doing? How do they catch the marmots?" asked a boy.

"First, I saw some smoke and, thinking there was a fire, I went there. I saw these evil men smoking the marmots out of their tunnels. As soon as they came out, they used a sharp metal rod to stab them to death," Lhamo said, tears in her eyes. Mother patted her back, but Lhamo trudged off, sobbing bitterly.

"We should stop them. This is our place and we should do something to protect our animals. We should chase them away from our place immediately," said one young man, his fist in the air. I moved to my family and stood near Uncle Dorje. I clutched Mother frantically.

"No, we should talk to them and try to stop them first," said Uncle Samkho, who always thought carefully, which led others to respect him.

The wind blew harder. People moved closer to the tent seeking shelter. Mischievous children played around the crowd, laughing and chasing one another. The dark sky increasingly took on the feel of snow, even though it was not the season for snow. It was about two in the afternoon. I tightly wrapped myself in my robe and turned to Father, who had been quiet through the whole discussion.



"Samkho is right! We shouldn't make any trouble. We need a good way to stop them," Uncle Dorje said loudly, waking up everyone.

*"Om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum, om mani padme hum..."* old women chanted continuously with solemn, sad expressions, hoping their chants would solve the problem.

"Who will talk to those Han people? We should choose someone who can speak good Chinese. Padyang's Chinese is really good," said Uncle Samkho. Father spoke excellent Chinese, because he often was in the county town, fiddling away his time.

"OK," Father said, raising his head, proud to be chosen.

"How about Samkho, Tashi, and you go there now and talk with them. The earlier the better!" said Uncle Dorje.

We all agreed. I approached Father and Uncle Samkho, and coaxed, "Father! Can I come with you? I want to see those people."

"No! Stay home. This has nothing to do with children. It's cold outside," Father said sharply. I moved back to Mother and Grandmother and we headed home. Aunt and Grandmother came to my home tent. The tent was cold. Mother took some yak dung from a tent corner and built a fire, warming us. A strange tension gripped us all. We had an early afternoon dinner and then Grandmother and Aunt Yangdrol returned to their tent. Mother and I were alone. It was frigid outside. The lower parts of the tent flapped loudly in the strong wind. I moved near Mother, feeling cold.

"Mother, why do those people kill marmots? Are they going to eat them?" I asked curiously.

"They eat marmots and sell their skin to earn money!" Mother replied.

"But we don't eat marmots, right? Why do they eat them?" I asked.

"It is not good to kill marmots. We don't eat them, because we pity them. Also if we eat them, misfortune will come," said Mother.

"Why won't misfortune happen to those people?" I asked.

"It will happen after they die or in the future, but they

will eventually be punished," Mother said.

I did not reply. I hoped Father would return soon. Mother went out to collect more dung for the fire. I followed her out. The air was cold and the sky was gray. I was surprised to see a bit of blue in the sky that was bluer than anything I had ever seen in my life. I heard the sound of an eagle, a sign of good luck.

Father had not returned after Mother and I finished collecting dung. I could see from her expression that she was worried. She rarely worried about Father, because he was always roaming outside our home. We had not eaten and I was famished.

"You build the fire and eat. I'll go see if your father is coming," Mother said and left.

I did not say anything. I was a little annoyed because I was afraid of being alone, but I also was worried about Father. I went to the hearth and stoked the fire. I felt something behind me, moving toward me. I turned and saw Father and Mother. I was surprised they had returned so soon. The unhappy expressions on their faces told me something was wrong.

"What happened? Is everything OK?" I asked eagerly.

"They refused to leave. They will kill more marmots. We talked for almost three hours. There is no movement in their hearts. They are terrible people," Father said, shaking his head disappointedly.

"What is the plan?" Mother asked.

"We're not sure. I must see Uncle Dorje and figure out the next step. I don't know if I can return tonight. You eat dinner. I'll go to his tent," said Father and left. Mother's face darkened like the sky before a storm. From her eyes I could see she was really angry with those intruders. The fire glinted in the hearth. It was warm inside the tent. We sat by the fire and had *tsamba*. We both felt it was tasteless, though it was our favorite food. The dogs barked hard in the distance. There was something horribly wrong with that noise. Mother was silent for a long time and then said, "You sleep. I'll wait for your father."

"No, Mother I can't sleep. I'll keep you company and also wait for Father," I said.

"Aren't you cold? It's very cold outside," Mother said.

"No, not at all," I answered. "Mother, are those people that bad? Aren't they afraid of the Lord of Hell? Will they go to Hell if they kill marmots?" I whispered, fearing the outsiders were standing by the tent door.

"Yes, of course they will be punished for killing. After they die the Lord of Hell will punish them," Mother said.

It was completely dark outside the tent. Inside, only a butter lamp shone dimly. We thought it would snow. It was piercing cold. I hoped I would fall asleep immediately. Mother made the bed and then we lay down together on the bed, but our eyes were open and we did not fall asleep. Mother's body was warm. I could hear her heart throbbing like summer thunder, clear and vital. I could also feel my own heart strangely pounding.

"Mother, did you fall asleep?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah, for a moment. What about you? Did you sleep?" she said.

"Just a little!" I said.

"Shall we sleep?" Mother asked again.

"Yeah," I answered.

A dog barking outside our tent awakened me. I opened my eyes and felt warm sunshine on my face. I was delighted to see the sun after two cloudy days. Many people had gathered in our tent. They were sitting by the open fire, drinking milk tea, and talking. I did not really hear what they were saying but from their manner, I knew they were happy. I put on my robe. Aunt Lhamo was laughing, and in the glow of the hearth, her beautiful brown face shone like polished amber. Mother poured milk tea for our guests and then gave *tsamba* to everyone. The bushes and sagebrush crackled outside. Thick, scented smoke drifted slowly throughout our tent and then upward through the opening at the top, toward Buddha in Heaven.

"What great news! Tell us how you solved the problem," Grandmother said.

Then Uncle Samkho gave this account:

It was both exciting and sad. When we first got to their white tent, just one of them was there, tending the fire. His name was Zhang Dong and he was very friendly. He offered us tea

and some delicious Chinese food we had never tried. We just chatted with him at first. We realized he was a nice person. We wondered why this kind man would come and kill marmots. As we talked, we explained our feelings about killing marmots and how we feel it is terrible. He was nervous and made no response. We kept talking.

A few hours later, we heard laughter and shouting and three strangers entered the tent. Their clothes were dirty with ashes. One of them held the bushes they burn to smoke marmots out. He had short hair and pale skin. His nose was very large, like the nose of our family dog. He forced a smile when he saw us, placed the bushes in a tent corner, and sat. The middle-sized man had broad shoulders and carried their metal sticks, knives, and other tools that I can't name. He had a big scar on his face that made him look very pugnacious.

The third one held the marmots they had caught. He was almost bald, tall, strong, and bigger than anyone there. The marmots he had were already dead. Their heads were half-cut-off. Blood plopped to the ground with a horrible sound. He put the marmots on a big piece of plastic on the ground and then washed his hands in a small basin. He said nothing. Zhang Dong approached him and whispered something in his ear. Then his expression changed. He sat beside us and I started explaining our objections to killing the marmots.

"What? You mean we must stop killing marmots because of your silly reasons? We don't believe what you believe. We don't think it's a sin to kill, it is the way we survive," he said loudly.

"We have no right to stop you doing this in other places, but this is our place and for us, this is just horrible," I said.

"Your place? Is this your place? Who said that? We will kill as many as we want and nobody can stop us," he said rudely.

Padyang and I were going to beg him to not do that but then a big fist sailed past us as Dawa smashed his face, making his nose bleed immediately. The other three got up quickly and tried to fight, but then I said "We don't want to use violence to solve this problem, so please think carefully."

"OK, let's talk amicably. We are friends and fighting won't solve this problem," Zhang Dong said, and asked his companions to move to one side. They discussed something and then turned to us.

"OK, we'll leave and won't return. But we'll take the marmots that we caught with us," they said.

"That's fine. Take the dead ones, but don't say that you got them here," said Padyang.

"OK," they agreed.

People laughed when Uncle Samkho finished.

"You must have scared him to death with that fist," a young man said and laughed, and then everyone laughed together.

"It's wonderful that they agreed to leave," Uncle Dorje said, drinking and eating at the same time.

"Solved finally! Thanks to Buddha!" the elders said.

I knelt on the grass mat on the floor near the hearth and crawled on my hands and knees to Mother's side. An unusual happiness grew inside me. My spirits were high and my body felt light and comfortable. The tent brimmed with happiness and excitement. I took the bowl of *tsamba* from Mother and sniffed it. It was great. I felt the bits of cheese were whiter and the butter was more generous than usual. I heard the sounds of the eagle, the free eagle. It was laughing.

## TO KANGDING COUNTY

Doomtso, our dog is barking. Go see if someone is at the door," called Mother from the other side of the tent, where she was making butter. The sun had set.

"OK," I said and stood from where I was picking grit out of the barley. Cheme played beside me. I thought Father might have returned with some of his odd friends. He rarely returned home but, when he did, he brought friends who only knew how to eat and smoke. Sometimes his friends brought pork as a gift for Mother and candies for my brothers and me. This time Lhodrul was with Aunt. I was glad Cheme and I could share the candies secretly, since Lhodrul always took more than his fair share.

I went outside and looked around. I saw a man and was disappointed it was not Father - not because I missed him, but because of the candies. The man looked unfamiliar. I looked at him without saying anything. I thought, "Is he a thief?"

"Girl, hold the dog. I'm afraid it will bite me," the man said, smiling.

I said nothing and did not move.

"Who's that?" Mother yelled.

"I don't know. A stranger," I answered.

"I'm not a stranger. Your mother knows me. Quickly, calm the dog. I have something important to tell her," he said.

"Who?" said Mother, coming out the tent and wiping her hands on the edge of her robe.

"Sister Chotso, it's me. Your daughter won't call off the dog," said the man.

"Oh, Brother Tsering. You've come! Come in please!" Mother greeted him and they both entered our tent with a big laugh.

"I'm sorry. She has never seen you and probably thought you were a robber or something," Mother explained.

"No problem. She's a child," the man said politely.

I followed them, feeling ashamed. I sat and resumed my work, listening to their conversation.

The man sat by the hearth. Mother poured him a bowl of milk tea. "Please have some tea," Mother offered.

"I just came from the county town and have a message from your mother," said the man.

"What does she want you to tell me?" Mother asked.

"She said butter sells very well in the county town. You should take the butter there and she'll help you sell it," the man said.

"Really? When did you meet her, Brother Tsering?" Mother asked.

"Yesterday. She wanted me to tell you this. Now, I must go, I have messages for a few other households," the man said and stood.

"Why don't you leave after dinner?" Mother offered.

"No, no. Not this time. I'm going," he said and left with Mother following him out.

"Thank you, Brother Tsering," Mother said and waved as he left.

I knew Grandmother was in the county town doing business, but I did not know she was selling butter. Mother told me Grandmother used to trade on horseback in many places when she was younger and that she was really good at business. Everyone admired her courage and talent. An only child, she was a tough, proud woman.

Mother entered the tent, washed the bowl the man had drunk tea from, and placed it in the cupboard.

"Mother, are you going to the county town? Can I come?" I asked, after finishing my work, holding Brother in my arms.

"Grandmother said we can get a good price for the butter. I think we should go," Mother said.

"If we go to the county town, who'll care for our home and yaks," I asked.

"I'll worry about that. If your father were here, he could take the butter to Grandmother. He's always roaming about," said Mother, tears trickling down her face.

"We can ask Brother Basang to care for our tent and yaks, right?" I asked, trying to comfort her.

"That's the only thing we can do. I feel ashamed, always asking him for help," Mother said, drying her tears on her sleeve.

"We helped his family a lot, right?" I said, trying to make her feel better.

"Yes. You stay and take care of Brother Cheme. I'll go to his home now," Mother said and left.

I lit the butter lamp. It was dark. I put dung in the fire so we could cook dinner as soon as Mother returned.

Mother was smiling when she returned and I knew Brother Basang had agreed.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He agreed. He'll come early tomorrow morning. He's such a nice boy," Mother said and started making dinner.

"Why don't you prepare clothes for you and your brother?" Mother said.

"OK," I said and put Brother down. I had a pair of blue jeans and a white jacket that Aunt had bought. I had only worn them once. They looked new.

"Mother, can I wear these?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure," Mother said.

After dinner, Mother said, "Now, go to bed. I'll wake you tomorrow morning."

"Have you been to the county town, Mother?" I asked.

"Yeah, a few times," she answered.

"When?" I asked.

"When I married your father, we went to his home many times. There are many people in the county town. Your father wanted us to stay there, but I didn't agree," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Your father's home is a farming place and I don't know how to farm. I thought we couldn't survive there. I have been a nomad for years and our ancestors are all nomads. How could I be a farmer not knowing how to farm? Your grandmother gave me a few yaks for my marriage and your father also had a few. I thought we could survive on these yaks if we worked hard. Your father always wanders in the county town and never cares



for our home," Mother said despondently.

"Tell me about the county town," I said.

"It's nothing extraordinary: big buildings, strangers, a few Tibetans. There is a big river there that drowns people when it floods. The streets are poor, the Chinese temples are ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist, they are hidden in fancy places and only visited by wealthy people," Mother said, describing the county town in a negative way. I did not understand why she despised Kangding so much.

"Sleep. We must get up early," she said in conclusion.

I said nothing, not wanting her to feel sad. I tried to sleep, but could not. My mind was full of images of the county town. The tent suddenly became dark and I knew Mother had extinguished the butter lamp.

It was morning when I woke. I rubbed my eyes. Mother was boiling tea. Brother Cheme was playing beside the hearth and already in his new clothes.

"Mother, where is Brother Basang? Is he here yet?" I asked, putting on my clean clothes.

"Not yet," she answered. "Come wash your face and help your brother wash his face," she said, making *tsamba* for us.

We washed our faces and ate breakfast. Brother Basang arrived just as we finished eating.

"Sister, when are you returning?" Brother Basang asked as he was about to herd our yaks to the mountains.

"As quickly as possible, maybe tomorrow," Mother answered.

"I'll bring a gift for you, Brother," I yelled as he left.

We mounted our horse and set off. I rode behind Mother. Brother Cheme was wrapped in Mother's robe. We had to ride to the township town and then catch a bus to the county town. The horse hooves clattered as we went along a pebbly path, sounding like a lama beating a drum.

The township town was not very far from our home and I ignored it because I only had the county town in mind.

"Mother, are we going to take our horse in the bus?" I asked.

"Certainly not," Mother said, laughing. "We will leave it

here in the township town. You stay here while I go ask someone," she said and left to ask someone to tend our horse until we returned.

I looked at people going back and forth holding plastic bags. They were busy and hurried.

Mother returned after some time and said, "Now, let's go catch a bus."

"Where is the bus?" I asked, not sure where to go. I followed her until I saw a white bus stopped on the street. There seemed to be thousands of bags atop the bus, which was full except for the two seats we occupied after boarding the bus.

"Sister, if a child takes a seat, you must pay for it," the driver said politely in Chinese.

"OK, I understand," Mother replied.

Brother was now bound to Mother's back and deep asleep.

"Come sit on my lap," Mother said and picked me up.

I looked around. There were almost forty people on the bus. They all were different from us. Nobody was wearing a Tibetan robe. They stared at us.

The driver started the engine and the bus moved slowly. It was my first time to ride in a bus. I looked out the window. Everything was moving.

"Mother! Look! Those mountains are going up!" I yelled.

"The mountains aren't moving, it's the bus," Mother said.

Everyone on the bus laughed and stared at me condescendingly. I felt ashamed and stopped looking out the window.

A Chinese woman sat by us, holding a pale, sickly little girl, who coughed softly. I looked at her and her eyes slipped away. My cheeks went warm with this rebuff. A few minutes later, I looked at her again - she was gazing out the window. Her mother stared at me in disgust before quickly looking elsewhere.

I felt city people were scary and unfriendly, so I stopped looking at them.

"Do you have a headache?" Mother asked.

"No, I feel sleepy," I said.

Mother held me closer, her arms around me, and soon I fell asleep.

"Little girl, we're in the town," called an unfamiliar voice.

I rubbed my eyes with both hands and realized I was in a man's lap. The bus had stopped.

"Doomtso, wake up. We are in the town. Do you still want to sleep?" Mother said, holding my hand.

"Say thanks to this uncle. He held you all the way here," Mother said.

I thought Mother knew him or maybe he was our relative, so I thanked him.

"Who's that uncle? Do you know him?" I asked.

"I don't know him, but your brother cried while you were asleep. I nursed him, so he helped me hold you," Mother said.

"Is he Chinese?" I asked.

"No, he is a Tibetan from Kunub. We were lucky to meet him," she said.

"Mother, where should we go? So many people are here," I said. All around us were tall buildings and colorful shops. I thought we would get lost.

"We'll call your aunt to pick us up. Where is a public phone?" Mother said, looking around.

"What is a public phone?" I asked.

"I'll show you if I see one," she said holding my hand, and our bags in her other hand.

"Sister," someone called in Tibetan in a very familiar voice.

We turned and saw Aunt Tsering Lhamo coming. She looked strange and fashionable. Part of her hair was permed. She looked like a wild cat.

"Are you tired?" Aunt Tsering Lhamo asked Mother, taking our bags.

"Oh, my niece is here," Aunt said happily and kissed my cheek.

"How did you know we were coming?" Mother asked in curiosity as we got on another bus to go to her home.

"Mother told me yesterday. I thought you might come today. I just came to have a look," Aunt said proudly.

"Aunt Tsering Lhamo, where is Brother Lhodrul?" I asked.

"He's at home, waiting for you," she said as we got off the bus.

"Why didn't he come meet us?" I asked.

"He said he would get all the toys ready for you," she said.

Aunt Tsering Lhamo's home was on the second floor of a white building. Tall trees stood around the building.

"Mother! Mother!" Brother Lhodrul yelled and hugged her as we entered the house. He lived with Aunt Tsering Lhamo from the ages of three to six and missed Mother a lot. He was very excited to see us. The house had two bedrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and a bathroom.

"Oh, my son, how are you doing?" Mother asked, picking up and hugging Brother Lhodrul.

Aunt Tsering Lhamo poured a few cups of hot water for us, chatted a bit with us, and then went to cook.

"Come in here, Sister. I have many toys to show you," Brother Lhodrul said, leading me into his room.

There were small cars, little men, airplanes, toy bricks, and cloth dogs. This was the first time I had seen so many different kinds of toys. In the herding area, we played with different shaped yak and horse bones and used grass to build nests for birds. We never had toys like these.

"Who bought these for you?" I asked in admiration.

"Aunt," he said. We played until Aunt Tsering Lhamo called us for lunch. She had cooked tomato with egg, meat with pepper, meat soup, and so on. We ate potatoes with rice in the nomad area. That was the only 'vegetable' we could get there. I had never tried so many delicious dishes before.

"Sister, finish quickly and I'll show you an escalator," Brother Lhodrul suggested while eating.

"Mother, can we? I know where to go," Brother Lhodrul asked Mother.

"OK, we will take the butter to Grandmother, but be careful of the cars," she said and handed us some money to buy

candy.

After we finished lunch, Brother Lhodrul led me down some streets and into a big building near a wide, crowded street. "This is a supermarket where people buy food and clothes," explained Brother Lhodrul as we entered.

I followed, open-mouthed. The first floor had food and the second was for clothes. I didn't know what was on the third and fourth floors.

"This is a flight of moving stairs, see," said Brother Lhodrul and stepped on the stairs. The stairs were moving. Brother Lhodrul stood on the stairs and soon he was on the second floor without walking. "Come, Sister! Step on it. It's really nice," he insisted.

I did not move - I was unsure how to get on. Brother Lhodrul came down when he saw I was not moving. "I'll help you," he said, holding my hand. Together we stepped on the stair. Without moving, we were soon on the second floor.

"Magic! Amazing! How does it move?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe there's a big river under the stairs," he said.

We went up and down a thousand times, giggling and laughing. Many adults and many children went up and down the escalator, but no one was as excited and joyful as we were.

People gazed at us strangely. "Get out of here! Whose children are these two? Don't play on the escalator! Go away!" a man in a dark blue uniform bellowed in irritation. His expression was solemn.

Brother Lhodrul held my hand and we went down the escalator.

"What is he saying?" I asked Brother Lhodrul since I did not understand Chinese.

"I'm not very sure, but I think he is saying we should leave," Brother Lhodrul said, and we quickly exited the building.

"Does this building belong to him? Why is he so upset?" I asked.

"Maybe. We can come tomorrow when he isn't here," Brother Lhodrul said.

"I feel city people are bad. They always scold people,

right?" I said.

"Yeah, you're right," he said.

It was already around six in the afternoon when we reached Aunt Tsering Lhamo's house. We opened the door slowly and peeked inside. Mother and Grandmother were chatting in the living room happily. Aunt was absent.

"Be quiet! They'll see us. I'll open the door wider. Bend your head and go into my bedroom, OK?" Brother Lhodrul said.

"Why? Grandmother is here and I want to meet her," I said.

"Just do it," he insisted.

I did as I was told. I looked back and saw him behind me. We slowly reached the sofa without Mother and Grandmother noticing. Unfortunately, Aunt came out of the kitchen and saw us.

"Where are you going? Stand up," Aunt Tsering Lhamo said.

Mother and Grandmother saw us. "Why are you hiding? Don't you want to see Grandmother?" Grandmother asked, stretching out her arms.

"We wanted to surprise you," Brother Lhodrul explained, looking guilty.

I ran up and hugged her, "Grandmother, I missed you! How is your business going?"

"Fine. Who told you I was doing business?" she said.

"Mother told me you are an excellent businesswoman. Is that true?" I asked.

Grandmother did not answer, but everyone laughed.

# 11

## MOVING

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I was in bed very early in the morning, feeling warm and comfortable. I did not feel like getting up. The weather was frigid outside and my hands got chilled to the bone as soon as I got out of bed. Mother had built the fire and the house warmed as Father packed up our stuff. I did not look at Father. I had decided to not look at him for the whole day. I covered my head with my sheepskin robe and pretended to be asleep. I thought we would leave as soon as I got up. My family had decided to move to the township town and that made me feel awful. I had never imagined we would leave our beloved homeland. I was angry with my parents, especially Father, since hearing the news the day before. I had cried the whole day. When I asked why we should leave, they just said they had important reasons and that children should not argue with their parents. I did not ask more after that.

"Doomtso, get up. It's time for breakfast. You must say goodbye to your friends. Here are some of your old toys to give them if you like," Mother said, holding Brother Cheme, who smiled at me.

"I'm not going to say goodbye because I don't want to leave! If you and Father want to leave it's OK. I'll stay here alone," I said angrily, and covered my head again with the sheepskin robe. Even now, I can hear Mother laughing. I could not sleep so I finally got up. Brother was playing by the fire. Father came closer to the hearth and sat.

"Why don't you want to leave our old place? Don't you want a more comfortable life somewhere else?" asked Father.

"Oh, Father! I love this place. I have many friends here. It's the most exciting place in the world. I don't want to leave!" I said.

Father said nothing. Maybe he thought I was right. Mother poured *tsamba* into a bowl and handed it to Father, and

gave another bowl to me.

I said, "I don't want to eat!"

"You have to eat a little, otherwise you'll be hungry later. It takes time to reach the township town, so eat some," Father and Mother urged.

I ignored them and left the house. I walked along a path by our house and down the slope to the road. I stood and looked up at our house and its surroundings, seeing them in a new way. I was full of an intense, despairing love. My house had been white when I was little, but now the paint had worn off, exposing gray, shabby boards. There was a yak enclosure, separate from the house, built by Grandfather. Around the house was a pile of yak dung and ashes, the reality being that the house had been built in their midst. Trees grew around the house. I do not know their names. I pictured myself swinging with my friend from a long, heavy rope that had been thrown over a low branch. Sometimes the rope swung so wildly that my friend went out over the ledge. She would scream and clutch me for what she seemed to think was her very life. Terrible panic arose within me for the first time as I fully felt the loss of my friends.

"Doomtso! Doomtso!" Mother called, bringing me back to reality.

I turned and saw they were ready to leave. I walked to our house. The neighbors were all around, holding white scarves. Children were playing. I saw my best friend sitting on the ground in a corner, sobbing uncontrollably. I approached her and patted her back, "Dolkar, please don't cry. I'll come see you often. I won't forget you. Please don't cry, please!" I said, embracing her tightly.

"No, you won't come and see me! You'll find many other friends, and you will forget me soon. I heard the township town is beautiful and that will make you forget all of us," she sobbed.

"No! No! I swear I won't forget you. I'll come see you. I don't like the township town. If I could choose, I wouldn't go live there. You are my best friend and I won't forget you, ever!" I said, ready to cry.

"Doomtso! Doomtso! Hurry! Put your robe on. Get



ready!" said Mother. I silently went into the house and put on my robe. The house was totally empty except for some old pictures on the walls. The hearth was warm and I could still smell milk tea all around the house, so nice, so nice...

I picked up a piece of yak dung near the hearth and put it in my robe. I felt like crying but I did not. I walked outside. Relatives and neighbors came and put many white scarves around my neck. They offered good wishes, warming my young heart. I thanked them.

"Mother, where are my toys? I want to give them to my friends," I said.

"Here," she said, handing me wooden birds, yak teeth, wooden sheep, and other playthings. Some had been made by Grandfather, who was very clever at carving and carpentry.

"Here you go! My toys! I want to give them to you. Play with them when you miss me, OK?" I said, handing them to my friends. I went back to Mother, who put me on a horse. We rode away, our relatives waving. We waved back.

"What did your friend say?" asked Father.

"Nothing," I answered without emotion.

"Nothing?" asked Father again.

"Yes. Nothing," I was angry with him. He said nothing. Tears came to my eyes for the first time. I lowered my head hoping no one would see. My throat ached with the effort to not cry.

We passed the small lake where I had spent endless hours swimming and catching tadpoles with my friends. The sky was darkening and the air hinted at snow. The lake was so still, it was difficult to believe one might ever penetrate its surface; impossible to think that there was life moving under that surface. I shivered, and instinctively wrapped my robe tightly around myself. I knew it would be hard to warm up if I got chilled, but I almost welcomed outside misery that would match what I felt inside. We rode on. I could see the mill where I had spent so much time with Mother grinding *tsamba*, where I first understood how good it was to help Mother with all my might. We made fires by the mill and had meals together after we finished grinding the barley. I loved to spend time with Mother at the mill even though the flour made us white all over.

Riding by, I felt lost, although I knew exactly where I was. My heart felt pain and my toes grew numb with cold. I had no sense of how much time passed. I wanted to rest, but did not allow myself to complain. I felt that if we stopped, I would be in a strange place again and then I would not know myself. Snow fell lightly. I did not know when it had begun. "We should ride faster. The snow will get stronger," Father said beating the pack yaks with his sling. I looked at Mother, who was gazing at the sky; Brother Cheme was sleeping in the pouch of her Tibetan robe. I then wished I was that young, unable to understand anything.

"Doomtso, ride faster. Beat your horse. What are you thinking?" I heard Father say sharply.

"Mother, why do you and Father want to leave the grassland? Why don't we just stay in our home?" I asked.

"If we stay on the grassland, how will you and your brothers attend school? You have to be educated to have a good life," Mother said.

"Nobody goes to school! Why should we be any different? I have no idea what I can do in school," I said, my voice becoming shrill.

Mother looked at me oddly and said, "If you want to have a better life, you must attend school. We don't want you to suffer as we have. That is the reason for the move," and then she galloped off to chase the pack yaks back on the right path.

I said nothing more. I thought Mother was probably right, because she cared for us the most and always made the right decision for us, though I might be unhappy with that decision.

We rode on, the snow intensifying and the day darkening. "We are almost at the township town," Father said.

"Where will we stay tonight? Do we have a place to stay? We don't have a house there, right? I asked.

"You're right. We don't have a real house there yet. But we asked somebody to rent one for us. We will stay there tonight," said Father.

"Is the house nice?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe yes, maybe no," answered Father. He and Mother were tired.

We reached the township town at around twelve-thirty. I had been there before. There was little change. Many houses were built near each other. Many tall trees stood around. Many shops, big and small, were full of thousands of items. I disliked the filthy, rubbish-strewn streets that stank, making me nauseous.

"Mother, where is our house? I'm cold and hungry," I complained.

"I told you this morning to eat something but you didn't. Now see? Now you know we were right. If you don't listen to elders, you will suffer. Your father has gone looking for the man who promised to help us. He'll be back soon," said Mother, patting Brother's head. He was still asleep, safe and warm inside Mother's robe pouch.

We waited and waited. Father did not return. I was getting really angry with him. "Mother, when will Father return? We've waited an hour already. I'm starving," I announced.

"I'm sorry, darling. Maybe we should find a restaurant and buy some food," said Mother. The road was covered with snow in thick drifts that made pleasant crunching sounds when we walked. Mother's steps were heavy but quiet and firm. I knew she was tired with Brother on her back.

"Mother, can I help you with Brother? I'll carry him," I said, meaning it.

"No, I'm fine. Be careful with the snow under your feet and look around for your father," Mother said. I looked around but did not see Father. I was frustrated and again wished that we had not come to the township town. When I turned, I saw Mother emerging from a restaurant with a bag of dumplings. Her feet were soaked.

"Mother, did you step in water? Why are your shoes so wet?" I asked.

"I stepped in a hole. It doesn't matter. Here are some dumplings. Eat," said Mother gently, putting the bag of dumplings in my hands.

"Do you want some?" I asked.

"No, I don't want to eat. You should eat them before they get cold," Mother said. I ate them all.

Father returned at around four-thirty. He had been

drinking. Mother said nothing. I said angrily, "Father, where did you go? We waited for you a long time! We are nearly frozen!"

"The man helping us asked me to drink in his house before seeing the house. I couldn't refuse. I was delayed. Now, let's go see the house," Father said.

I could see a man in a dirty Chinese suit about 200 meters from where we stood. I knew he was Father's friend, because Father's friends looked Chinese. I did not like them very much. "Hello! How are you?" he said to Mother.

"Hello! I'm good, and you?" she replied, looking down.

"I'm fine. Sorry to make you wait so long," the man said politely.

"That's OK. Thanks for your help. We really appreciate it," Mother said.

"Let's go see the house. I think you must clean it before night comes," said the man, which made me feel he was not as bad as I had imagined.

The house was a one-room shack by the main street. It was very small, had a narrow door, and the roof was so low it almost touched the ground. Holes were in every corner and the floor was of stone. The room emanated a sickening odor that was worse than that of the streets. Water leaked from the roof as I stood there. "We are beggars!" I thought, never imagining I would stay in such a miserable place. Garbage was strewn everywhere and traffic sounds were overwhelming. No bed, no table, nothing but garbage was in the room. I was devastated. I really did not know what my parents were thinking.

"OK, this is where you'll stay. I'm leaving. I've got something else to do. Good night!" said the man and left.

Mother put my brother in my arms and cleaned the floor with a broom made from a bundle of twigs. Father went to drive the pack yaks 300 meters away. There was no place to sit. I stood, holding Brother in my arms. I was tired, but I had to bear some burden for Mother by not complaining. She was exhausted and I really wanted to help. Father returned in thirty minutes and Mother helped him bring our belongings inside and put them in a corner where it was not too wet. Most of the packed clothes were wet, however, because of the snow.

"Mother, where will we sleep? We have no bed and the

ground is wet. I feel really sleepy," I complained. Mother only looked at Father.

"OK, I'll go borrow some cushions and some blankets from our neighbor. Maybe they have some extras," said Father and left through the small door. Father was large and the doorway was so small that it was hard for him to pass through.

"*Wa! Wa! Wa!*" Brother suddenly started crying loudly . Father came in at that moment with some blankets and cushions, and made two beds on the ground. He told me to sleep on one and I flopped down immediately. He took off his shoes, lay down on the other, and fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

Brother Cheme was still crying, though Mother nursed him. "Mother, come sleep! Aren't you tired?" I asked, making some room for her.

"Sleep. I'm not tired. I'll stay up till your brother is asleep, otherwise he won't let us sleep well," Mother said. I put my head on the pillow and drifted off to sleep but I could still hear the "*Lo-lo, lo-lo,*" Mother sang to lull Brother to sleep. I dreamed I was back at my home on the grassland. I heard Grandfather chanting in our tent full of the scent of milk, so nice, so comfortable.

# 12

## REGISTRATION

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I woke up very early in the morning feeling excited. It was my first day of school. I had watched many children going to school with school bags and candies, laughing and playing with their friends. I did not know how it felt to attend school. Mother and Aunt had decided to send Cousin Dechen Wangmo and me to school. We were the only children who went to school from the nomad place in Mother's home area, because there were no schools there. If families had a son, they sent him to be a monk, or he followed his father to learn how to cut firewood and trade with other herders. Families kept girls at home for work. When they were old enough they married and moved to their husbands' homes, or sometimes the husbands came to live in the wives' homes. Herders did not understand how important school was for people's futures.

"Isn't it too early to get up? What's the time?" Mother asked, raising her head from the pillow.

"Mother, you scared me!" I complained.

"Are you OK?" she asked, turning on a light.

"Yeah, I'm OK," I answered.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. I couldn't sleep. I'm too excited about going to school," I said.

"Soon you'll be bored with school. Aunt Tselha sent her daughter to school and said for the first few days she liked to go to school, but soon she felt it was too hard. I hope you won't say the same thing," Mother said and lay back in bed.

"I won't. I know school is useful," I assured her.

"Mother, get up! You'll go to school with me. Right?" I said.

"Of course. Put on your new clothes and shoes. I also bought a school bag for you," Mother said, putting on her clothes. Brother Cheme still slept. Mother got out of bed

without waking him. Mother and Aunt had gone to the county town to buy new clothes for Cousin and me because we were attending school together.

"Mother, when is Brother Lhodrul going to school?" I asked.

"When he is your age," she answered.

"Why not now?" I asked again.

"He's too young," she replied.

"I can give my school bag to Brother when he goes to school, right?" I asked.

"Sure," Mother answered.

"Go and see if your aunt and cousin are up. If they are, tell them we will eat in a restaurant since today is your first day of school," she continued.

"Really?" I said, unable to believe my ears. I was delighted because Mother seldom took us to restaurants, since it was expensive. Aunt's family had moved to the township town and lived by our house. We had built it together after we sold our yaks. From the door, I could see her light was on. I rushed inside. Cousin was putting on her new clothes and shoes. Aunt was building a fire.

"Aunt Yangdrol, Mother said we will eat in a restaurant. She said you should come to our house and we will head off together," I said.

"Oh? Really?" Aunt Yangdrol said.

"Yeah, that's what she said," I answered.

"Where's your school bag? What color is it?" I asked Cousin, who was washing her face.

"Red. How about yours?" she said, raising her head from the basin.

"Black. Mother said black is harder to get dirty," I said, showing her my bag.

"I won't make my bag dirty. I'll always keep it clean," Cousin said, looking at my bag.

We set off. The sun had already risen. On the way to the restaurant we saw many children going to school carrying big, heavy schoolbags.

"Soon, we'll be like them," I thought.

The school was in the center of the township town, at

the foot of a mountain, and near our homes. We entered a dumpling restaurant near the school and took seats.

"What do you want to eat?" the waitress asked kindly, looking at Cousin and me. We could not answer since we didn't know any Chinese. Mother laughed and ordered.

"You'll learn to speak Chinese after some time in school. Study hard, understand?" Mother said, patting our heads.

The waitress returned with twenty dumplings and four bowls of porridge. The food was great. I did not know Chinese restaurants had such delicious food. Mother and Aunt did not eat much so Cousin and I finished it all.

The school was very big. Small candy shops were nearby. Children went in and out of these shops, holding different-colored candies. I had never seen so many children together in one place before.

The school gate was built in the Chinese style, with both Chinese and Tibetan written above the gate.

"Mother, what do these words say?" I asked.

"Lhasan Hope Primary School," Mother answered.

"Why does it say 'hope'?" I asked.

"It means that if you go to this school, there is much hope for your future," Mother answered, looking at the word 'hope' again.

"Where shall we go next?" I asked, holding Mother's hand. I was nervous and excited.

"Let's go inside and ask. I think we should register first," Mother said, looking around for someone to ask.

We followed Mother wordlessly, feeling lost. Two rows of buildings faced us as we entered the gate. One was the classroom building. Students sat in small chairs outside classroom doors reading loudly from books. I looked at them admiringly and thought the school was certainly a great place.

"Excuse me, where do we register?" Mother asked a middle-aged man who happened to walk by.

"Go straight and turn left," he said kindly.

We went as directed and joined a crowd of children and adults. A teacher was writing new students' names on a white sheet. We got in line and soon I was in front of the teacher.

"What's your name? How old are you?" the teacher



asked gently.

"My name is Doomtso. I'm seven!" I quavered, my legs shaking.

"Let's see whether you can touch your left ear with your right hand from behind your head. If you can, you are old enough to go to school," the teacher said.

I complied and happily succeeded.

"OK, write down her name, address, and age here," said the teacher and pointed where Mother should write.

"OK, next," the teacher said when Mother finished. Mother had learned rudimentary reading and writing after two years of schooling beginning when she was twelve years old. The government had established a temporary school in a local home at that time and students were required to attend.

Cousin was next. She was also afraid and nervous. She was five months younger than me and it was a little hard for her to reach her left ear with her right hand, but she did.

We were unsure of what to do next, so we sat on some stone benches and waited for people to finish registering. I looked around. Students were playing around the schoolyard, chasing each other. Boys began fighting with brooms and anything they could find. Girls sat on the ground playing with stones.

"OK, stand here when I call your names and later we'll go get your books," said a teacher and started calling names. "Dadron, Phuntsok Dolma, Tsering Lhamo..."

Cousin and I were numbers nine and ten.

"OK, you are in the same class," the teacher said to us. I looked at my classmates; there were thirteen of us in total. There was only one boy; he was small, short, cute, and timid.

Mother and Aunt Yangdrol waited, smiling and talking about us quietly. I could not hear what they were saying.

"Now come with me. I'll take you to your classroom," said the teacher.

The classroom was not very big. Chairs and desks were around the classroom. Everything was tidy and nice.

"Any volunteers? Who will help me get your new books?" the teacher asked, smiling at us.

"Me! Me! Me!" some students yelled, raising their little

hands.

"OK. You, you, and you," said the teacher, choosing volunteers. She picked the three students who were taller than the others, so I was also selected.

The room where the schools kept books was really big and held thousands of colorful books. The sheer number of books made me dizzy. The teacher chose the books and we then returned to the classroom. We had math, Tibetan, Chinese, and art books. The teacher told us to choose seats by ourselves. We quickly chose seats and waited patiently, and then the teacher handed out the books. I touched my books gently and put them in my new bag carefully. It was the first time for me to have my own books. I was very excited.

"OK, we'll start class tomorrow. Come to this classroom at eight-thirty tomorrow morning. Don't be late, otherwise you'll be punished. Understand?" said the teacher.

"Yes, we got it," we replied.

"Who can repeat what I just said? Raise your hand?" the teacher said gently.

The classroom fell silent. Everyone lowered their heads, feeling shy.

"Anybody?" the teacher asked again. Nobody responded.

"Now go home," the teacher announced and we rushed out of the classroom.

I held Cousin's hand and we ran to Mother and Aunt.

# 13

## MOTHER IS SICK

---

I was in my bedroom, uncontrollably sobbing with soft bitterness. Tears streamed down my face like a river. The room looked strange and scary. It was no longer my beloved bedroom. I felt the entire house was full of the spirits of dead people who had failed to move on to Heaven or Hell and were stuck wandering in this world. I had been hiding in my room the whole day. My lungs constricted, making it difficult to breathe. I was suffocating, dying. My legs were numb, no longer a part of me. Mother's heavy, ponderous breathing was audible through the thin wall. Brother Lhodrul came many times and asked me to come out, but I could not. I dared not see Mother's pale, gaunt face.

My relatives passed in and out, offering food and tea to monks chanting for Mother in the prayer room where we made religious offerings and where we kept Buddha images and *tangka*.<sup>8</sup> The monks had chanted for almost three days, beating drums, chanting from very thick scriptures, and moving ritual implements in their hands without stopping. Official workers that Uncle knew suggested taking Mother to a hospital, but Grandmother strongly rejected this.

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<sup>8</sup> *Tangka* are a form of primarily Tibetan sacred representation consisting of an image panel that is painted, embroidered, or appliquéd, which is often placed in a textile frame. The image panel frequently depicts such imagery as mandalas, deities, famous scenes, or prominent local religious personalities. They are hung up high in monastic halls, village temples, and family homes as objects of veneration. A piece of silk often hangs over the image to prevent defilement by secular life, and protects the image from light and dust. In the context of village ritual, setting up images creates interior and exterior worlds mediated through the representation of the images.

"Hospitals are no good. What they want is money. They can't cure her illness," she insisted stubbornly. Chanting was the best way to cure illness in her mind and relatives followed without question.

Uncle had met a great lama from Serda and we invited him to our home to check Mother's illness.

"This is not a good sign," the lama said shaking his head, "a female demon has possessed her."

"Is there any way to cure her? Please," asked my relatives.

"Did she wear black clothes that do not belong to your family?" the lama asked.

"I don't think so," said Grandmother.

"This female demon has lived here for a few days and is doing great harm to this family. She is very powerful. You must invite a few monks to chant and purify the house," said the lama.

"Our house is next door. Will the demon harm our family," asked Aunt Yangdrol.

"Possibly. Take action quickly. I'll return after they finish chanting," said the lama and then he left. My great uncle then went to monasteries, inviting monks. Two days later, six monks chanted for Mother. They beat drums and swayed their upper bodies back and forth hundreds of times while chanting. Mother was totally unconscious before the monks came. Her eyes stayed closed but, a day after the monks came, she opened her eyes and spoke occasionally.

"Doomtso, boil water for the monks. They need to wash their hands," called Aunt Yangdrol from outside my bedroom door.

"OK," I said, finally finding my voice.

I went to the living room. No one was there. I took a bucket and went to fetch water from the well that we had paid to have dug a few years earlier. I filled a kettle with water and put it on the stove, where fire sparkled like red fireworks. I stepped into Mother's room and saw Grandmother sitting by her.

"Did you boil water?" Grandmother asked.

I silently nodded.

"I must go check something. Stay and talk with your

mother," said Grandmother as she left.

I got up and sat on Mother's bed. She looked at me with motionless eyes, stretched out her arms, and held my hand. Her hands were ice cold. My mind stopped functioning, but I prevented tears from falling. She soundlessly observed me.

"Mother, are you sick?" I asked.

"No, I'm not sick. I'll be fine. Don't worry," she said in a low, shaky voice. All energy seemed to have drained from her body.

I was filled with a feeling of dread so strong as to make it difficult for me to breathe, and nearly impossible for me to move and speak.

Every day, Great Uncle went to the mountains to offer wheat flour, *tsamba*, and liquor to our mountain deity. A great lama told us, "Don't trust mountain deities with your lives. They and local deities are only of short-term help. Once you trust a mountain deity with your lifelong happiness and wealth, you will not receive blessings and help from the Buddha." Consequently, when Uncle went to ask help from the mountain deity, he only asked help for certain things.

The monks chanted constantly, except at meal times. The chanting finished after five days. As custom dictated, when the monks finished chanting and were about to leave, our family presented some cash to each monk in a clean, white *khadak* to show appreciation.

Great Uncle escorted the monks to their monasteries. As soon as they left, the great lama returned. We were unsure how he knew the monks had left. Nobody had informed him. He had many scriptures and religious implements. He sat by Mother's bed, took out his ritual implement, swayed it around Mother's head, closed his eyes, and chanted something melodiously. Next, he took out a few very thick scriptures and beat Mother's back very hard three times.

"See! The female demon went out the door. She was wearing black clothes!" said the lama, pointing at the door.

We looked at the door. I saw nothing, although Grandfather reported seeing a shadow pass outside the door. Grandmother said only special people could see such things.

Mother steadily improved after that.

# 14

## FASTING

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**D**oomtso, come wash your face. The tractor will arrive soon," called Mother early one morning from the kitchen where she was boiling milk tea.

"I'm coming!" I shouted, rushing into the kitchen.

"Here's hot water," Mother said, gesturing to a water pot in a kitchen corner.

"Mother, where did you get the milk?" I asked curiously.

"Aunt Zompa brought a few bottles yesterday," Mother said.

We seldom made milk tea after moving to the township. We had sold almost all our yaks and horses. After a long argument, Father finally agreed not to sell six yaks, which Aunt Zompa's family kept. Aunt Zompa brought butter, yogurt, and milk to our home once every two months, but they kept most of it for their own impoverished family. Keeping our yaks helped them in many ways.

"I think we can't finish all the milk this morning. We should take some to Grandfather and Grandmother," Mother said.

"Yeah, we should. Grandfather likes milk tea a lot. Where is Brother Cheme?" I said.

"He's crying in the yard," Mother said without paying much attention as she put *tsamba* and butter on the table.

"Did you beat him? Why is he crying?" I asked.

"I didn't beat him. He's crying because we won't take him to Gyalgo," Mother answered.

"Why not?" I asked.

"He's too young to attend religious activities and it would be troublesome to take him with us. I'll leave him in our relative's home for three days until we return," Mother said,

handing me a bowl of *tsamba*.

"I'll go take Brother to our relative now. Is that OK?" I asked.

"Finish your *tsamba* and then go," Mother said.

As soon as I finished my *tsamba*, I went directly to my relative's house and left Brother Cheme there. "Sister, take me please!" he called, crying loudly, but I ignored him. I was excited because I would also fast. I had observed my grandparents and parents fast, but never tried it myself. I ran all the way home. The tractor was there and Mother had finished packing our food. Many other people were going with us. Some were total strangers, and some I had seen before, but I did not know who they were.

"Mother, will anyone watch our house after we leave?" I asked curiously.

"Uncle Tashi will. Don't worry," Mother answered.

The driver came with a bucket of water from the river by our house. He was a tall, strong man with a walrus mustache. His eyes moved everywhere. His hair was a mix of black and white. He cleared each nostril by holding the other closed with his forefingers and blowing fiercely in a deliberate and time-efficient manner. The sun rose over the ridge, glaring at the wooden houses and barns.

"OK, let's get going!" the driver called, starting the engine. His voice was loud but kind. Everyone got into the small tractor-trailer. We were squeezed together inside.

"Be careful, don't jostle the children and the elders," said a soft feminine voice from the back.

Young people started to give up their seats to elders.

"Grandmother, sit here. Take my seat," said a young man, even though he had never seen the old woman before.

"Here is also one, come here," called a young woman to an old man.

Young people helped hold children in their laps. The trailer was still so crowded we could hardly breathe, but no one really minded. The small track that led to Gyalgo was narrow and hazardous. Horsemen trading sheep and yak skins with other herders had made the path. Mother said Grandfather had been on this track a thousand times. People chanted silently,

holding their prayer beads and closing their eyes.

"*Wa!*" an infant cried. Everyone turned as its mother nursed it. Her face blushed like an autumn apple.

Our trip took almost two hours.

"We're here. Get off, everyone," called the driver, turning off the engine.

"Thank you," said one man. Others were busy with their belongings. Everyone went their own way. The driver left, a big smile on his face.

Mother put our bags on her back and held my hand. I could see that she was in a hurry. "Mother, where are Grandfather, Grandmother, and Aunt Yangdrol staying?" I asked impatiently as we walked to a mountain that was not very tall.

"They rented a room from a family over there," said Mother, pointing to a white-painted room just ahead of us. While most buildings were mostly made of wood, some people made their homes by digging into the mountains. Mother said this kind of house was very cool in summer and warm in winter. It was like a cave, but ten times bigger. I thought it would take years and years to build such large caves. Grandmother told me that these were meditation caves for important lamas many years before but, later, they all went to India to visit the great temples there and never returned. Local people then enlarged the caves and made them their homes.

"Are you tired?" greeted Aunt Yangdrol when we arrived. Flour covered her hands. I guessed she was making bread. She took our bags and led the way into a warm room full of the nice odor of offerings. I smelled burning juniper and baking bread. Mother and I sat on a yak-skin mat by the hearth.

"Have tea," Aunt Yangdrol said, offering milk tea and another yak-skin mat.

"Yangdrol, open the bags. Inside are *tsamba*, butter, milk, and raw meat," Mother said.

"We already have lots of food. I think there'll be enough for us all until the end of the fast. You shouldn't have brought so much," Aunt Yangdrol said.

"Mother, you said we can't eat meat during the fast. Why did we bring so much?" I asked.



"We won't eat meat during the fast, but if guests come, it's rude to not offer meat," Mother explained. Hospitality was very important. People spread rumors about stingy families.

"Where are Grandfather and Grandmother?" I asked Aunt Yangdrol.

"Circumambulating temples and stupas," Aunt Yangdrol answered.

"I want to go too. May I?" I asked.

"They'll return for lunch. They must be hungry because they've fasted for two days," said Aunt Yangdrol, looking out the window to see if they were coming.

"I'll go to the gate and wait for them. Can I?" I begged Mother, pulling her sleeve.

"OK! Go!" Mother agreed and I rushed out the door.

"Don't go anywhere else. There are many dogs. They'll attack you," Mother called.

"OK," I replied, although I was not sure she heard me, since I was already at the gate.

It was cool outside. I could smell burning incense and juniper. In the distance, the zigzag path was like a dragon, circling the entire mountain. This was where people circumambulated the whole monastery. There were big and small stone piles made by the circumambulators. I saw people add to the piles. Every time they added a stone, they chanted, "*Om mani padme hum.*"

"What is the use of these stone piles? Why do people make them?" I asked Mother when we were visiting a meditation cave.

"People chant scriptures before they add a stone to these piles. This stays on the stone until it disintegrates. These stone piles are good for all creatures living nearby," Mother explained.

The smoke became dense and the odor of smoldering juniper grew strong. The sun was high in the sky, shining brightly. I saw a group of people approaching. I could not see their faces clearly, but one was walking, leaning on his walking stick. I was sure he was over eighty. My grandparents were healthy, strong, and did not use walking sticks.

"Grandfather! Grandmother!" I called and ran to them

when I saw them in the group.

"Oh, when did you arrive? Where is your mother?" they asked simultaneously.

"We just arrived. Aunt Yangdrol cooked bread and we brought *tsamba* and butter," I said, holding their arms.

"I was thinking you would not have lunch," said Aunt Yangdrol when we arrived.

"Today the number of people increased. Many people are circumambulating the stupas. We could hardly make a circle," Grandmother explained.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"No," Grandmother answered, shaking her head. She picked up a piece of bread, dipped it in yogurt, and put it in her mouth.

"You will know how it feels tomorrow," Grandfather said and smiled. He took a few piece of bread and a bowl of yogurt from Aunt Yangdrol.

"When can I fast?" I asked.

"You had breakfast this morning, so you can't do it today," Mother said.

"Which fast do you want to do? The big or small one?" Grandfather asked, patting my head gently.

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"Let Grandfather eat first. He'll tell you after he finishes," Mother said.

I was a little unhappy, but did not insist. Aunt Yangdrol poured two bowls of yogurt - one for Mother and one for herself.

When Grandfather finished eating he said, "There are four different fasts. The double fast is for two days. You must wash your face, hands, and feet the first day after you get up. Then you drink as much water or milk tea as you want, but you can't eat anything. You must also make sure that what you drink contains no food. You can speak during the day. At noon, lunch can only be white food. You can't eat meat, garlic, and green onion. You must say prayers the entire time you make religious offerings. Around six p.m., you drink a few cups of tea, but eat no food. The next morning, clean your feet, face, and hands just after you get up and then you can't eat, drink, and speak for the

entire day."

"Which one is best?" I asked.

"Of course the big one is better, but it's also harder," Grandfather said.

"I will do the big one if it's better," I announced.

"The big one is really hard. Children usually can't do it," said Mother.

"I can do it. Let me try. Please!" I begged.

"Our girl can do it," Grandfather said and Mother finally agreed.

"Are you going to circumambulate this afternoon?" Aunt Yangdrol asked.

"A lama will give a religious teaching this afternoon. We will listen. All of you should come. We have seats just in front of the lama," said Grandmother.

"May I come, Grandmother?" I asked.

"Of course," Grandmother agreed.

"The teaching starts at two-thirty and it is two-ten now. Shouldn't we get going?" I said.

Grandfather took his prayer beads and prayer wheel from the window ledge.

"You three go first. We'll come right after we tidy up the leftovers from lunch," said Mother.

"Come quickly! Don't be late," said Grandmother. I held Grandmother and Grandfather's hands and together we went down the mountain. The religious teaching was to be held outside the temple in an open area. So many people had come to listen that it was impossible to have the teaching in the temple. We went through the crowd to where Grandfather and Grandmother had kept seats for us. Everyone sat on the ground. Most people wore very thick robes so it did not matter that the ground was wet. People had come from everywhere - old and young alike. We saw many Han people who had also come to hear the lama. You could only hear chanting. Nobody chatted. The lama had not yet arrived. The open space was full of people; every corner was full of people. I looked around for Mother and Aunt, but the ground was so crowded, I did not see them. Suddenly people chanted loudly and everyone stood.

"Stand up. The lama is coming," said Grandmother.

The lama was in his forties. He wore a yellow T-shirt. His other clothing was red. Helped by two monks, he took his seat.

"Everyone sit, please. You don't need to stand. We are all the same," the lama said, wearing a kind smile.

Everyone sat. It was absolutely silent. People were silently chanting.

"I appreciate your coming and I hope this teaching will help your life," said the lama, placing a ritual implement and small bell to one side.

"Let's chant together for a good start for our teaching today," said the lama and began chanting. Everyone followed and he then began the religious teaching. He talked about Nirvana and how to achieve it. Then he talked about the obstacles to finding enlightenment, such as killing, stealing, gambling, smoking, drinking, and lying. He talked about all the harm they brought and the benefits of not doing such things.

The teaching finished at around six p.m., when the sky was already dark. Many said the teaching was so meaningful and impressive that they would remember it until the end of their lives.

"Did you understand what the lama said?" Grandfather asked me.

"Yes. I shouldn't drink and smoke, right?" I said, proud of all the things I understood.

"Right. Good girl. Our daughter is growing up and can understand things," said Grandfather with a happy smile.

Many people lived nearby, but most people had come by tractor-trailer to hear the teaching. Everyone was busy returning to where they were staying. The door was locked when we reached our room. Mother and Aunt Yangdrol were gone.

"They'll be here soon," said Grandfather, looking down the small path leading to our room.

Mother and Aunt arrived a few minutes later.

"Did you find a seat?" Grandmother asked after we were inside.

"No, we just stood in the crowd," Aunt Yangdrol said.

"I told you to come early," Grandmother said.

"Did you hear everything?" Grandfather asked.

"Yes," Mother said.

Aunt Yangdrol went to start a fire and cook noodles for dinner.

"Aunt, are you going to cook noodles tomorrow?" I said.

"Yeah, but remember you're going to fast tomorrow so you can't eat noodles, right?" Aunt said kindly.

"Yes, I nearly forgot," I said, a little ashamed of myself.

"See, you only think about eating. Can you really fast tomorrow?" Aunt Yangdrol asked and everyone laughed.

Grandmother and Grandfather went to bed after a few cups of milk tea.

I stared at the sky outside the small window where darkness had swallowed the earth in a quick gasp. Soon a black sheet covered the earth. Only a few stars shone in the sky before the moon climbed the mountains to light another dim night. The moon was round and silvery, cleaving the clouds that swayed like waves. Outside was brighter than inside, since we only had butter lamps.

"The food is ready. Take three bowls from the drawer," Mother said from the other corner of the room. I could smell the food. I was standing by the window gazing at the moon. I ran to the drawer. Grandmother said that on special days you could see a rabbit in the moon, which meant good luck.

"Here," I said, handing the bowls to Mother.

"Now, eat plenty, because you can't eat tomorrow," Mother suggested.

"I can eat tomorrow at noon. It is the day after tomorrow when I can't eat anything," I protested.

"How do you know so much?" Mother asked curiously.

"Grandmother explained, and Grandfather also told me some," I said.

"Do you want more?" Aunt asked when I had finished three big bowls, licking the bowl clean each time.

"No, I'm terribly full," I answered, rubbing my tummy.

We all went to bed after dinner. I slept with Mother since we did not have enough beds. I had difficulty falling asleep. I watched Mother who was soon asleep. The night was silent, except for barking dogs.

I was so excited that I woke up at around four a.m. I put

my clothes on, lit a butter lamp, and peered through the window. Nobody else was up.

"What are you doing? It's too early to get up. Come sleep," called Mother drowsily.

I felt cold, and obeyed.

"You sleep. I'll wake you up when it is time," Mother said.

The bed was very warm, but I could not sleep. My eyes stayed open a long time. I was unsure when I fell asleep but did not awaken until Mother called, "Doomtso, get up! Wash your feet, hands, head, and face," while pouring water in a basin for me. The sky was dark. It was still early, but this was the normal time nomads arose. Aunt was cooking a wild herb for breakfast. She said this kind of plant was medicinal, lowered your fever, and decreased your appetite.

"Oh, I'm coming" I said sleepily and got out of bed.

I washed my head, face, feet, and hands. Grandfather said bodily cleanliness was very important when fasting. I dried my hair near the hearth. I could smell the food that Aunt was preparing, but I was not hungry, because I had eaten so much the night before.

"Where are Grandfather and Grandmother?" I asked.

"They're sleeping. It's cold outside and they can't eat today. We'll let them sleep until dawn breaks," said Aunt.

"Milk tea and water are all you can have this morning. No food," Mother said.

"Yes, I know," I said confidently.

Grandfather and Grandmother rose at daybreak. Mother told me not to talk to them, because they could not speak the whole day. I obeyed. Grandfather and Grandmother went to circumambulate the temple as soon as they finished washing their hands, feet, head, and face.

"Mother, I want to go with Grandfather and Grandmother. Is that OK?" I asked.

"No, I'm afraid you'll speak to them accidentally. That's really bad. Turn Grandmother's big prayer wheel," said Mother, pointing to the wheel on Grandmother's pillow. I picked up the wheel and said nothing for a while.

"Mother, is it OK to gesture if you can't speak?" I asked.

"Yes, but it's better if you don't," she said.

"Now, chant something. Don't talk too much, you should seize this special chance," Mother said.

I did not speak until lunch. I chanted hundreds of times and spun the wheel thousands of times.

"Come, lunch is ready," Aunt called after she finished cooking. She placed a few mats by the hearth, and then put food in front of me.

"Where are Grandmother and Grandfather?" I asked.

"Circumambulating. They won't return," Mother said.

"Don't stand up until you finish eating, because you are not allowed to sit down again and eat," Mother said, holding a plate of bread.

"Why?" I asked.

"That's the rule. Eat as much as you want, because you can't eat this afternoon and all tomorrow," she said, putting the bread in front of me. I asked no questions after that and ate.

"I'm full," I said after finishing the food in front of me.

"Drink more tea or you'll be very thirsty." Aunt Yangdrol suggested.

"I can't," I said.

That afternoon passed quickly. Mother took me to circumambulate the entire monastery along the mountain. It was a long trek. Many people were circling the monastery and the stupas. I met many children who were also fasting. Some were younger than me. One girl was seven. She said she had been fasting for eight days.

After a few cups of tea, I went to bed with an empty stomach. Mother said it was better to go to bed early if you felt hungry. I chanted a little in bed, but I soon fell asleep. The first day of the fast had not been very hard.

Mother called me late the next morning because she knew I would feel hungrier if she woke me early. They had decided to leave in the afternoon since it was the last day of the fast. I washed my face, hands, feet, and head. I had little strength. I could hardly move my hands and it was quite impossible for me to reach my head and feet. That day was very cold. The wind was chilly and strong and the feel of the air portended snow. Now I truly felt hungry and thirsty. I almost

could not step forward. The hearth was warm and comfortable. Mother was busy packing and Aunt was busy cooking. Grandfather and Grandmother had gone to circumambulate since it was their last day here. They wanted to circle the stupas and the monastery as many times as possible before leaving.

This fast was special. A great lama held it occasionally. It was rare to have the chance to do such special, honorable activities. Mother and Aunt had breakfast. I stood drooling while they were eating. Mother and Aunt looked at me occasionally, but said nothing. They were afraid I would forget and speak. My stomach was churning. My throat was very dry and I was breathless.

Grandmother and Grandfather returned when lunch was ready.

"How is your daughter? Is she OK? She has made a great achievement at such a young age," said Grandfather kindly.

"I think she's fine. I believe that she can pass through this difficulty," Mother said. It felt good to hear that Mother had so much hope in me and I was even more determined to show my strength to everyone. I did not want anyone to say that I was unable to do something.

The tractor came around five in the afternoon. The driver was an arrogant young man. Light snow had fallen on an icy, frosting earth. Soon real snow would come. Grandfather and Grandmother sat in the inner part of the trailer. The rest of us stood. About thirteen people were crowded in the trailer. The snow fell so thickly we could no longer see the monastery. We quickly resembled snowmen. My legs felt numb again. I was starving. I could hardly stand.

"Hold me!" said Mother when she saw how weak and pale I was.

The tractor chugged on. Snow covered the world. All was white.

My body was as cold as ice, but my heart was warm because I had not failed.



MOVING TO LHASA

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My family decided to move to Lhasa, but we were unsure if our decision was truly final. My family, including Aunt Yangdrol and Aunt Tsering Lhamo, held a secret meeting. Children were excluded. Brother Lhodrul listened outside the window and heard everything. He was smart and cunning and told me about what he had overheard when I returned from school. He was wildly excited. Lhasa was the place of the Buddha. Everyone dreamed of going to Lhasa, a place where melodious birds sang, the perfume of flowers filled the air, and you could eat as much fruit as you liked. Grandmother described a wonderful place where there was no suffering, no conflict, no desire, no killing, and no discrimination: a place where everyone lived equally.

It was my first term in grade six in a poor primary school.

"Have lunch, children," Mother called as we stood outside the house.

"OK," we answered and ran into the house together.

Mother had cooked meat-stuffed dumplings for lunch, one of my favorite foods, which my brothers were also very fond of.

"Mother, this afternoon, I'll have a final exam in Chinese," I said.

"Oh, what exam did you take this morning?" she asked.

"Tibetan," I said.

"How was it?" she asked.

"Not bad," I said, looking at her, wanting her to mention something about Lhasa. She did not, which disappointed and annoyed me.

I went to school after lunch. My classmates were shouting and running around as usual. There was no anxiety and worry in taking an exam. I sat, looking like I had been captured

by a demon. Ten minutes remained before the exam.

"Long Neck, what's up? Did you lose your soul?" Dolma said, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"No, nothing," I said.

"Oh, really? Are you really OK? Are you worried about the exam?" she asked.

"No, of course not. I never worry about exams. I'll do as well as always," I said.

"OK, I'm not worried if you're OK," she said and went to play with our classmates.

Everyone sat as soon the teacher entered the classroom holding the exam papers. He usually taught third grade in primary school. School rules dictated that the teacher who taught a class could not monitor that class for an exam on the subject they taught.

"You are not allowed to sit together. Move apart. No cheating!" the tall, good-looking teacher said as he walked around the classroom. Students who were sitting with their desks together moved to separate desks and looked at each other, sufficiently intimidated.

"Nothing on your desk. Everything in your desk, except your pen. No wandering eyes," he added and began handing out the exams.

"Write your names at a top corner of the first page, then start. Leave your test on your desk when you finish, then you may leave," he said.

Everyone bent their head and started. The classroom was silent.

The exam was easy, but I could not focus. All my thoughts were on moving to Lhasa. One by one the students left the classroom. I finished too, and joined my classmates, who were talking about the exam.

"I think the second answer is right, because I reviewed it yesterday," Tashi said.

"Yeah, right. I think it's correct, too," Dolma agreed.

"Hey, Long Neck! How was the exam? You surely did well," my friend said.

"Not really. I was only focusing on my family moving to Lhasa," I sighed.

"What? You're kidding me! Your family is moving to Lhasa? When?" my friend asked in a shocked voice.

"I'm not sure. That's what my family decided this morning, or so my brother said, but they didn't tell me anything," I said.

"Moving to Lhasa! How exciting! I have dreamed of going to Lhasa, but never had the chance. You're very lucky," my friend said in a tone that made me uneasy, since I was unsure we were really moving. Regret overwhelmed me when my friend told my classmates.

"Is it true your family is moving to Lhasa?" Dadron asked. In a moment, I was surrounded by more classmates.

"Don't ask, I'm not sure," I said.

"I heard your father is in Lhasa, right? Are you going to see him? Did your father buy a house in Lhasa?" Tashi asked. Father had left home after he and Mother had quarreled. Later I heard he was in Lhasa helping Uncle, Mother's brother, who had been in Lhasa for years doing business.

"Yes, he's in Lhasa, but I'm not sure if we're moving there," I said, and fled in endless regret. I knew I should not have discussed something I was unsure about.

"Hi, Doomtso, don't leave. Tell us more about your family's move," Dorje called from behind me. I ignored it. I felt numb and my mind was blank.

It was nightfall when I got home. The yard was silent except for a pig's snores. The horses were munching fodder, their backs and flanks steaming with sweat. The lights were on in both my home and Aunt Yangdrol's home. I saw my brothers running around the house playing. I saw stars sparkling in the sky. In the pale moonlight, smoke and sparks spouted out from chimneys atop my home and Aunt Yangdrol's home. I smelled the smoke in the air, meaty and spicy, with a hint of prickly ash.

"Mother, I'm home!" I announced as I entered.

"Why are you back so late? How was your exam? Do you have more exams tomorrow?" Mother asked, coming from the kitchen.

"No. The exams are finished. They went well," I answered, putting my bag on a table by the TV.

"Oh, that's good! I hope you did well on the exams," she

said, and returned to the kitchen. I followed her. I wanted to ask her about moving to Lhasa and help her cook noodles. Whenever we had noodles, I picked out the meat and left the rest. Mother scolded me for this because she believed wasting food was sinful.

"Is it true we will move to Lhasa?" I asked, daring not to look into her eyes.

"Who told you that?" she asked.

"I know you were discussing it," I said in a voice so quiet that I could hardly hear myself.

"That's what your uncle wants us to do. We sort of decided to leave, but nobody is sure," she said. I looked at her as strange feelings overwhelmed my heart. I did not know if I was happy or sad.

"Did you tell any of our relatives that we plan to leave?" I asked.

"No, but we will when it's settled," she said.

Mother and my brothers ate noodles that night. I ate *tsamba*. After we finished, Mother went to Aunt Yangdrol's house to talk. I told her that I wanted to go too, but she refused. My brothers and I went to bed early. It took me a long time to fall asleep.

I was awakened by a noise outside the window early the next morning. I peeked out and saw Mother, Aunt, Grandmother, and Cousin standing by the window. They looked astonished and uncertain. I put on my clothes and went out. A hundred people were standing in the yard holding white strips of silk and money. Aunt Zompa, the mother of my friend, Dolma, was in the middle of the group. Some of our relatives and other people from the town that we knew were also there. Their expressions were sorrowful.

"I heard you are leaving for Lhasa. Is that right?" a neighbor asked quietly. Mother was afraid and nervous and said nothing. Cousin was equally ill at ease.

"We didn't decide. What may happen is still beyond our imagination," Grandmother said.

"I heard this news early this morning. I thought you were leaving soon," Uncle Thunkho said.

"No, I think it won't be very soon, but thanks very much

for your concern," Grandmother said.

"Yesterday my daughter told me your family is leaving. I thought it must be soon," Aunt Zompa said.

Mother looked at me, her eyes sparking with anger.

"No, we aren't leaving soon. We'll tell you as soon as we decide," Grandmother said gravely.

People then left with their strips of silk and money.

"Who told them we were leaving? Nothing is decided yet!" Grandmother yelled angrily.

Mother looked at me again, but said nothing. I knew she did not want Grandmother to beat me.

Aunt Yangdrol and the others looked at each other silently. Only Mother and I understood.

Things grew more complicated over the next few days. My family and Aunt Yangdrol's family decided to leave a month before Losar. Many people tried to persuade us to leave after Losar, but we did not change our decision.

People came and asked us to sell our furniture at a cheap price. Mother enjoyed doing business and was happy our furniture could be so easily sold. People were constantly coming in and out, holding small and big items. Within a few days, half the furniture was sold and our house suddenly had more space. We children were overjoyed as more and more of our belonging passed into others' hands. We knew leaving was imminent and we were happy.

"Sister, will there be many candies in Lhasa?" Brother Cheme asked.

"I guess so," I answered.

"Sister, I really want to leave for Lhasa soon. I can't wait anymore. I was asleep and imagining the many wonderful things about Lhasa," he said.

I felt a sudden thrill in my chest. Something soft was filling my throat. My heart brimmed with emotion.

"Children, I must go to Aunt Zompa's place and sell our yaks," Mother said when we were sitting at the dinner table. A hush fell over the table. Brother Lhodrul was playing with his food. He did not say anything. Cheme reached for a small piece of cornbread left on the plate the two shared. I thought maybe Mother was only talking to me since I was the oldest who could

actually be involved in family discussion.

"Who will buy the yaks? What about my horse?" I asked.

"We can take your horse in the car and then we can ride it in Lhasa," Brother Cheme suggested.

"The horse is too big for a car. Stop talking nonsense," Brother Lhodrul retorted.

Mother laughed and said "I'm going to sell two yaks to Aunt Zompa's neighbor. I'll find others to buy the rest. I think we will just free your horse," Mother said.

"What if you can't find people who want to buy them?" I asked after a long pause.

"Sister, you are a black crow," Brother Cheme said.

"We can sell them to the slaughterhouse. Uncle Dorje did that when his family moved to the county town, right?" Brother Lhodrul said.

"I would never sell our yaks to the slaughterhouse. It's better to give them away to others," Mother said, glowering at Lhodrul.

"I mean, going to Lhasa is surely more important than saving yaks from the slaughterhouse, isn't it?" Brother Lhodrul said.

# 16

## TO LHASA

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It was an exceptionally cold winter day when we set out for Lhasa. Winter was always frigid in Lhasgan, with wind, dust, and frequent snowfall. Though the winter weather was challenging, it provided children the chance to ice skate, one of the few fun things to do during tedious winter days. The river by my home froze solid in the winter, and we loved to play on it. We had to walk a long way from my home to get to the bridge to cross the river in the summer. A monastery and forests were on the other side of the river and this is where most of our play areas were. We could just walk across the ice in winter, which made crossing the river much easier and faster. Brother Lhodrul and I collected yak dung in the winter in baskets Mother made for us. Lhodrul and I crossed the ice every morning to collect dung from the other side of the river. Lhodrul was small, and so was his basket, which filled up after adding just a few big pieces of dung. He then waited for me to fill up mine.

Skating on the river was fun. It was even more exciting to slide down small hills. This was fun but dangerous. Big sheets of ice formed where small springs trickled out of hills. We wore thick robes in winter and did not feel cold. Lhodrul was very adventurous, I was a tomboy, and we were never scared when we slid downhill. My cousins joined us and, when we finished collecting dung, we spent at least an hour playing on the ice.

Winter holidays were much longer than summer break because the school could not afford to pay for fuel to keep us warm in the classrooms. I hated winter in Lhasgan, except for playing on the ice, and thus was excited at the prospect of leaving for Lhasa in mid-winter. Mother told me Lhasa was a sunny city and, though she had never been to Lhasa, she always got excited when talking about Lhasa, which was typical of

many local Tibetans. Mother sold nearly all our furniture, and gave our pots and pans to villagers. She burnt some of our old clothes, and gave away the rest. Mother disliked wasting things. She even picked up bottles she found and kept them in our home. Our last piece of furniture was Mother's first chest, which was made of wood. Mother stored her best robes there, which she wore during Losar and on other special occasions. Before New Year, Mother bought me new clothes, which I folded neatly and kept in her chest, which exuded a very pleasant odor. Mother was pretty, and she liked jewelry, but it was never her goal to show off her beauty or to be rich. She was a simple nomad woman who had great dignity and dreams of her own. I always wanted to be like her.

"You can have it for 150 *yuan*," Mother said to Lhakyid, a neighbor who came two days before we left and asked to buy the chest, and then watched as Lhakyid and her husband carried the chest away.

"Mother, we'll get you a new one once we are in Lhasa, right?" I said.

"Yes. I was expecting to get a higher price for this one. It is such a nice chest but it is hard to ask for a higher price from people you know," she said. She had paid 600 *yuan* for the chest. Aunt Tsering Lhamo sold most of her furniture as well. She had a large house and many pieces of expensive jewelry. She was rich compared to Mother and Aunt Yangdrol. She paid little attention to the price of the furniture she sold. Aunt Yangdrol's family decided to leave after Losar, and then there was some conflict with her husband's family. Uncle Samkho's parents were unhappy about them moving to Lhasa. Perhaps they were afraid of losing a good source of help. Aunt Yangdrol's family then decided to delay their move. I did not understand all the details. Family conflicts were too complicated for me to grasp.

Grandfather came with us, while Grandmother decided to stay with Aunt Yangdrol's family and help solve the family conflicts.

We left Lhasagan on the twenty-sixth day of December in 1999. Like every other morning, Mother got up early to prepare breakfast. Traditionally, relatives come to see people off and give money if they are really close; otherwise they give *khadak*.



More than fifty relatives and friends came to see us off that freezing morning.

"Be careful on the road," said one relative, putting a *khadak* around my neck. We had a close relationship with most of my maternal relatives, while relationships with my paternal relatives were more distant.

"Don't worry, we will," Mother and Aunt Tsering Lhamo replied as they got into a car.

Grandfather sat in front where there was more space and a better view.

We had a hard time finding a bus that would take our many pieces of luggage. Uncle Samkho walked around the township town for a couple days and finally found a private driver who had enough space in his car for our luggage. The driver was a friendly, good-looking man from Litang. He had three years of driving experience, mainly taking customers between Lhasan and Litang. It was very difficult to find private drivers at that time and we were delighted that he had promised to take us to Chengdu because he normally only drove between Litang and Lhasan. Most local farmers and nomads had never been to Chengdu, which was considered very far away.

"It's such a dirty city and full of Chinese people who eat almost everything they see," we often heard people say. But, for young people, Chengdu represented a place of wonder.

It was my first time to visit such a big city and I was bursting with excitement. "How often do you go to Chengdu?" I asked our driver.

"I was only there once. There is only one road to Chengdu from here. We won't get lost," he replied with a smile.

"What do they have in Chengdu?" Lhodrul asked drowsily.

"Everything - tall buildings, shops, and fancy cars. I hope one day to have a car like the ones in Chengdu, and then I can drive to Lhasa," the driver said passionately. "Oh, by the way, why are you moving to Lhasa?"

"My brother is doing business there and wanted us to come and enjoy a better life," Mother answered.

"What does he do?" asked our driver in curiosity.

"He is a businessman," Mother said.

"What kind of business?" our driver said.

"He owns a *tangka* painting gallery," Mother said uneasily. Uncle was not very successful with his business at that time and was in debt to many people.

"That's good. It's nice that you have someone to depend on in a new environment," the driver said wisely.

"Of course it is," Mother said.

It took us a long time to get to Chengdu and we did not stop for lunch. I was very ill from motion sickness, as were Lhodrul and Cheme. Nevertheless, we were told to eat because that would make us feel better. Most restaurants on the way were owned by Chinese and none of us could communicate well in Chinese, so we ate bread and yak meat in the car.

I had finished fifth grade when we left Lhasgan and could read and write Chinese well, but I did not speak Chinese fluently. I was often just too nervous to speak Chinese. We did not speak Chinese at home and most of our teachers were local Tibetans. My grandparents did not want us to speak Chinese and told us to avoid Chinese people.

We arrived in Chengdu late in the evening. I did not know that Uncle was in Chengdu waiting for us. He had rented hotel rooms for us to stay in. I was very excited by the size of the city and its countless lights, but I was also ill from the long car ride.

Uncle took us to a nice restaurant for dinner and then we went to bed back in the hotel. I was so tired that I quickly fell asleep.

We got up early because our bus to Lhasa was scheduled to leave early in the morning. Uncle wanted Grandfather to stay in Chengdu for a few more days and take the plane with him. We all thought it was a good idea. We were worried Grandfather would get tired on the bus because it was such a long trip.

Mother told me that nomads and farmers hired trucks to go on pilgrimage in groups because it was cheaper and you could visit several important monasteries on the way. Traditionally, pilgrimages were made on foot, which took months or even years. After roads were improved, people

increasingly took buses and planes.

The sleeper bus we boarded had fifty narrow, uncomfortable, short berths. Mother, Aunt Tsering Lhamo, Dakar, Lhodrul, Cheme, and I were in our group and were the only Tibetans on the bus. The others were Chinese or Muslims. We felt uneasy. Two young, experienced Muslim drivers took turns driving. They said it would take four days to reach Lhasa.

We waved at Uncle and Grandfather as the bus started.

"Grandfather, come soon!" I shouted from the window.

"Mother, when are they coming to Lhasa?" I asked Mother when I could no longer see Grandfather and Uncle.

"In a couple of days. I'm not sure. Your uncle didn't tell us," Mother said.

"In three days, I think. When we reach Lhasa, Grandfather will be waiting for us," Aunt said, smiling.

The berths at the back of the bus were very small and we felt terribly cramped. There was no space to move your body so we ended up huddling together. The Chinese men on the bus smoked constantly. The bus was filled with the stink of smelly feet and smoke. Lhodrul and I got very car sick, as did Mother. The disgusting odor made it worse. We vomited constantly.

"Maybe it would be easier to walk to Lhasa. At least I wouldn't be car sick," I thought. Then I considered the distance and the time spent on the way in such harsh weather and I felt lucky to be able to wrap myself in a blanket and sleep on the bus.

"Time to eat!" yelled one of the drivers, stopping the bus in front of a restaurant in a tiny hamlet with only a few scattered buildings. We did not know where we were. Aunt opened a window, looked around, turned to us, and said, "Let's get out and see what they have in this restaurant."

"Put on your shoes and let's get some food," Mother said, waking Cheme and Lhodrul. She helped them put on their shoes and then we got off the bus and found that it was very cold outside. We wrapped our robes more tightly around ourselves. I was happy I now had fresh air.

"Do you need to pee?" Mother asked.

"Yes," answered both of my brothers.

"I don't," I answered.

While Mother took my brothers to pee, I looked around, trying to figure out where we were and how near we were to Lhasa. I did not see the town name written anywhere. The town looked like it was abandoned. There were only a few small buildings standing silently, their doors shut, tattered curtains flapping in the windows and making a noise that made me a bit homesick. Prayer flags atop mountains in Lhasa make a similar sound when they flap in the wind, but I saw no prayer flags on the mountains near this town. I assumed it was a Chinese town. I thought that if there were no prayer flags, it meant there were no Tibetans there. Dogs constantly barked and motorcycles stuttered in the distance, but no one was in sight.

I turned and saw Mother retying her sheepskin robe. My brothers stood trembling in the wind. We had not had the chance to buy them warm clothes in Chengdu. People had told us that the sleeper bus provided warm blankets but, in fact, there were not enough blankets for everyone. We huddled together to keep warm at night.

"Let's go inside," Aunt said, heading toward the restaurant. We followed, holding Mother's hands.

All the tables were taken except for a small one in the corner. We sat down while Mother and Aunt went to check what the restaurant had to offer. They soon returned and Aunt said, "They are Muslim so we can't eat here."

Mother said, "Do we have any food left on the bus? I'll go check," and left the restaurant.

Our elders told us that Muslims believed in a religion totally different from ours and we should not eat their food nor be friends with them. Unlike many other Tibetan areas, people in my hometown did not eat mutton because we thought mutton was Muslim food. "If you don't obey, we will let a Muslim or Chinese take you away," elders threatened. I then visualized Chinese and Muslims as demons rather than ordinary people.

Mother returned and said, "I'm glad we still have much bread and meat left."

The bus drivers only gave us thirty minutes to eat. Mother bought a pot of hot water from the restaurant and we had a quick meal.

We boarded the bus after eating. We were uncertain

when we would reach Lhasa and we did not ask anyone on the bus. It slowly grew dark. I felt Lhasa was still far away and decided to sleep. When I slept, I felt time passed faster and I did not suffer from car-sickness.

Mother woke me up regularly to eat and pee when the bus stopped periodically but I did not get up. I was tired, dizzy, and slept most of the next day. I woke up once late in the evening and saw Lhodrul vomiting. Luckily, we had prepared plastic bags beforehand.

"Mother, when will we reach Lhasa? I feel like we have been away from home for so long, and we're still traveling," I whimpered.

"We'll be there soon, probably tomorrow," Mother said encouragingly.

"Tomorrow? Really?" I said in excitement.

"Yeah, late tomorrow afternoon," Aunt said.

I was very happy to hear this because I yearned to get off the bus and breathe fresh air, even though it was freezing outside. I looked through the window. It was pitch black outside - no light, no moon, nothing. I could hear a Chinese man snoring and then realized how difficult it was to reach Lhasa. Though I had heard people say how hard the journey was, I had never imagined it could be this challenging and I could not imagine walking for months to Lhasa for I could hardly bear four days on a bus. There were even people who prostrated all the way to Lhasa, which took years. I could not conceive of people traveling for great distances without shelter and little food, and who never stopped, even in rain and snow. Their goal was to see their beloved Buddha image in the Jokang and see their precious holy city. I felt Grandfather was so brave and strong. His determination and motivation had made him such a strong person and I felt ashamed to be his granddaughter.

A Chinese man got off the bus that night and Aunt then moved to his bed with Dakar. My brothers, Mother, and I then had more blankets that night and slept better. When I woke up the next morning, we had already passed Amdo County, which is 700 kilometers from Lhasa. Mother and Aunt ate bread and meat, as did my brothers. I only had one piece of meat and then slept until Mother woke me and said we were in Lhasa. I rubbed

my eyes and looked out a window. Our bus stopped at a bus station and we put on our shoes. While Mother and Aunt went to unload our luggage, I looked after Cheme, Lhodrul, and Dakar. The people in Lhasa had such dark skin that I felt we might be in an African city.

"Oh, you're here! Was the trip tiring?" called someone. I turned and saw Father and Uncle Balo, Aunt's husband.

"It was OK," answered Mother and Aunt simultaneously. Father and Uncle then helped get our luggage and called for a taxi. Father had left for Lhasa when he and Mother quarreled. I did not miss him and felt no excitement in seeing him, though much time had passed since I had last seen him.

"Where is the Potala?" I asked, recalling people describing it as large and magnificent, a symbol of our history and pride.

"We can't see it from here, but we'll soon pass by it," said Uncle Balo. We all piled in a taxi driven by a Tibetan. Uncle Balo told the driver where to go in the Lhasa dialect. I did not understand a word he said.

"Children, there is the Potala," Mother said a short time later.

"Where? Where?" we demanded, looking about.

"There," Mother said, pointing.

"Oh, I see it!" Lhodrul yelled.

"Wow, it's huge! Is it built on the mountains?" I asked, filled with curiosity and excitement.

"Yes it is," answered Uncle Balo.

"When was the Potala built?" I asked, staring at the top of the Potala.

"During Songtsan Gampo's<sup>9</sup> time or his father's time, I'm not sure," Mother answered.

I looked at the Potala and wondered, "How could people at that time build such a magnificent palace without machinery and technology? Did they build the palace by hand?" I was

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<sup>9</sup> Songtsan Gampo (569–649?/ 605–649?) was the founder of the Tibetan Empire who greatly expanded Tibetan power beyond Lhasa.

amazed by the courage and determination of our ancestors.

"Father, is Grandfather now in Lhasa?" I asked, suddenly remembering we had left Grandfather with Uncle in Chengdu.

"He and your uncle arrived yesterday," Father answered.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"He's in your uncle's house. He'll come over tomorrow," Uncle Balo said.

Father and Uncle Balo rented two rooms in a hotel on a street crowded with Chinese and Muslims. Muslims gathered every morning in front of a local mosque, wearing white hats and dressed mostly in black. I wondered how such a small hat could stay on their large heads and never fall off. The Chinese in Lhasa operated various shops and also sold vegetables. I thought they were very loud, especially when they were selling vegetables. There were few Muslims in Lhasan, so I was very surprised to see so many Chinese and Muslims in Lhasa. I had imagined Lhasa to be a Tibetan-only place - a land filled with Buddha's compassion. We children were taught to chant and not kill. That's how we were taught to be Buddhist. I was puzzled why elders thought Lhasa was a paradise. I am not sure exactly what I expected Lhasa to be. Maybe I thought it would have many playgrounds and amusement parks, but this was surely not the case. I wondered why my family had decided to spend the rest of our lives here. We had sold everything and moved here, and now had to seek a new life, but we could not even communicate with our own people. We had never lived so close to Chinese and Muslims in Lhasan. Would they cheat and fool us as our elders described? Everything seemed very unclear.

# 17

## LHASA TEENAGER

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A month passed and then Aunt Yangdrol's family arrived. Grandmother took the bus with them. Everyone worried she might get sick, but she refused to take the plane and arrived in Lhasa in fine health. We were still living in our two rooms. Uncle came that afternoon to check on Grandmother.

"Aju, did you have a hard time on the way?" he asked. Uncle called Grandmother Aju because he could not pronounce *ama* 'grandmother' when he was a little child. Later, all of Grandmother's children called her Aju, including Mother, Aunt Yangdrol, and Aunt Tsering Lhamo. I did the same. I called Aunt Yangdrol 'Ajo' because I did not know how to pronounce *ane* 'aunt'. Later, all the children in the family called her Ajo, including her own children. Uncle Dorje Dondup and I were always blamed for misleading the young.

"I was fine. It wasn't very difficult," Grandmother said.

"Was the food alright on the way?" Uncle asked.

"Not bad, and we brought food from home," Aunt Yangdrol answered.

After Aunt's family arrived, we left the hotel and all moved into one big apartment. It was the first time our three families - all fifteen of us - had shared one home. We had lived near each other in Lhasgan, but each family there had their own home. The children loved it because we slept in one room and made as much noise as we liked, but the adults were inconvenienced.

Grandfather and Grandmother went to the Jokang early every morning to circumambulate and make offerings. Life seemed more meaningful and fulfilling for them than for the rest of us. Mother worried how she would support us with no income. She had to spend her savings and the money she had earned from selling our furniture to pay for food and rent. She did not expect Father to take responsibility and earn income



because Father had never grown up since the first day they met. I am sure she was desperate but, at the same time, she was used to having an irresponsible husband. She had to figure out everything on her own. When we were in Lhasan, our few yaks provided butter, cheese, and milk. We also had a garden where Mother cultivated potatoes and vegetables for winter and summer, and Mother also opened a small gift shop to earn money to buy rice and other family necessities. She never worried about us going hungry. Now, in Lhasa, Mother worried about not speaking Lhasa dialect and, unlike Lhasan, the large Chinese population in Lhasa made finding work difficult. Mother did not speak Chinese and only read and wrote poorly. Her worry and concern increased as the days passed. Aunt Yangdrol and Aunt Tsering Lhamo were less worried because they had their husbands to rely on and they had more savings than Mother.

We children grew restless as the days passed. We initially went to the Jokang with our grandparents and found the shops and crowds exciting. But we slowly grew tired of it all and were no longer interested in circumambulation. There were no forests and grassland to play in, nowhere to play on the ice, and no place to build artificial bird nests. We were restricted to playing inside the apartment, because we had heard some people stole children and sold them. The image we had of Lhasa as paradise had long vanished.

I totally forgot about school during the first few months and nobody in the family mentioned anything about education. Everyone was focusing on getting settled and earning income. Then one day when Mother told me and Dechen Wangmo to go buy bread, we noticed a girl in a pretty uniform writing her homework in front of the bread shop. She looked up as we ran into the shop hand in hand, laughing. We smiled, and she smiled back. She was working on her math homework. I wanted to look closely at what she was writing, but I was afraid she might get angry. I then realized I had not done any homework for a long time.

"What do you girls want?" asked the lady in the bread shop, whom we assumed was the little pupil's mother.

"Aja, we need fifteen pieces of bread," I said. Aja is a

respectful way to address an older woman.

"OK. How old are you?" asked Aja.

"I'm twelve and she's eleven," I said.

"I see. Both of you are older than my daughter. She's ten. Where do you go to school?" Aja asked.

"Um... We don't go to school," I said. Dechen Wangmo usually remained quiet when we were together.

"Oh, really? School is so important. Nowadays, if you don't know how to read and write Chinese, you can hardly make a living. You should be in school," Aja said in a concerned tone, handing us the bread.

"OK, Aja," we said and took the bread. I glanced back at the girl as we left the shop. I thought maybe I should go to school like her, wear pretty uniforms, and do assignments.

"Do you want to be in school?" I asked Dechen Wangmo.

"I didn't want to attend school when we were in Lhasan. We had too much homework and little time to play, but now I feel like returning to school. I wonder what it's like to attend school in a big city," she said.

"Yeah, me too. I want to be in school," I said, thinking about what Aja had said.

"I guess if we attend school, we won't have to stay in the house everyday if we don't circumambulate. Isn't that a great idea?" Dechen Wangmo said in excitement.

"Yeah, you're right," I said. I knew that attending school was more than just getting out of the house. When I was younger, Mother had decided to move to the township center to send my brothers and me to school. Many people thought my parents were insane, knowing it was hard to survive in the township town without a way to earn income. Mother knew life would be harder in the township town, but she was concerned about our future, and did not think about hardship for herself. Life was very hard the year we moved to the township town. We had difficulty in finding a place to stay, standing in the road in the snowfall, and waiting for Father to solve our problems. When it rained and snowed, the streets were muddy and filthy. Garbage piled along the roads and stank terribly when the weather was hot. After Father drank himself into a stupor with

the landlord in order to establish a relationship, we finally found a small room by a muddy street where we cooked, ate, and slept. We did not even have a yard where Mother could wash our clothes. But Mother never gave up. My brothers and I went to school like everyone else in the township town. And now, in Lhasa, we faced bigger challenges. I wondered what I could do to help Mother and the family.

Everyone sat in the living room that evening after dinner and chatted as usual. "Mother, can you come here?" I said, standing at a bedroom door.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have something to say," I said.

"OK," she said, standing up and adjusting her robe.

"What is it?" she asked as she reached the door.

"When are you sending us to school?" I whispered in her ear.

"Right. How could I have totally forgotten that? I'm so glad you remembered. We must talk to your uncle about this. Maybe he can help," Mother said.

"How about Dechen Wangmo and her brothers? Are they also going to attend school?" I said.

"I'll ask her. Let me talk to them and your uncle tomorrow," Mother said, and then we went back to the living room to watch TV.

Mother talked to Uncle Dorje Dondup the next morning, and he promised to check and see. He believes in the importance of education. Mother also talked to Aunt Yangdrol, who said she would send her children to school if we found one.

Uncle had a difficult time because a Lhasa identity card was needed to enroll in a school and we lacked such cards. Uncle Dorje Dondup and Uncle Samkho looked everywhere in the city to find a school that did not require an ID card, but all was in vain. I became sad and felt miserable. I thought there would be no more education for me. Mother and Aunt Yangdrol were also anxious.

I have found that patience is needed when facing challenges. If we keep trying, problems can always be solved and then we realize how much we have matured. Problems give us a chance to grow. Buddhism teaches that we should be

grateful to our worst enemy, more grateful than to our parents or our lama.

Father and Uncle Dorje Dondup then went to the county towns and finally found a primary school for my brothers and a junior middle school for me and Dechen Wangmo. The school was in the township where Uncle Dorje Dondup had his *tangka* gallery. Uncle Dorje Dondup cleared one room in his *tangka* gallery for us to stay. Lhodrul and Cheme attended primary school with Tashi and Jamlo while I attended junior middle school with Dechen Wangmo. Dechen Wangmo and I were in charge of cooking for all of us after school because our parents continued to live in the city.

When we first got to the school in the township town, my classmates and schoolmates thought we spoke strangely and assumed we were Chinese. They denigrated us. We were outcasts. "Look at those two outsiders, they are new Chinese here," said the children behind our backs. Dechen Wangmo and I could not speak the local dialect and we had no way to defend ourselves. I cannot describe how much I wanted to tell them that we were not Chinese. The students gossiped about us and some even approached and scolded us.

"We aren't Chinese, we are Tibetan. We are Khampa," I told a group of students from my class when I could speak enough of the local dialect to communicate.

"Khampa? Are you Khampa? I heard Khampa stab people with knives," said one student and then they all stepped back.

"We don't stab people! What are you talking about?" I said angrily.

"You do! I heard from my father that Khampa are like wild beasts and kill people without blinking an eye," said a boy, who then ordered everyone to avoid us because we might stab them.

"No! That's not true! We don't kill people like that!" I said, and started crying, as did Dechen Wangmo. Seeing us cry, they left the classroom.

Their ideas about Chinese were negative and so were their ideas about Kham. I thought that Kham, Amdo, and Lhasa people were all Tibetans with the same written language, the

same ancestors, the same pilgrimage places, and all believed that the Potala was the center of the world. But they thought Kham people were dangerous and all they wanted was for us to go away.

"I don't understand why all the students in school think Khampa are bad," I said to Mother one Saturday afternoon as we circumambulated the Jokang, where Mother took me to circumambulate on weekends. Teachers told us that school children and government official workers could not be religious and that good members of the Youth League were never religious. I was a member of the Youth League in school because it was considered an honor. I was always eager to join a group if it was an honor. Nevertheless, I ignored the rules and went to the Jokang. Grandmother thought such rules were ridiculous and I understood that being religious was a part of who we were. The Jokang was usually filled with people after sunset and surrounded by shops of all kinds. It was one of my favorite places.

"Why? Do the students treat you badly?" Mother asked, looking into my eyes. She wanted me to tell her the truth whenever she looked into my eyes.

"They don't beat us or anything like that, but they avoid us because they think Khampa are killers. Is that true?" I asked.

"Of course not. We are brave, strong people. We don't kill people randomly. Don't believe what they say," Mother said, looking at her watch.

"Do all Lhasa people think the same way about us?" I asked.

"No, but even if they did, that's not who we are. To win someone's heart, you must win your own heart," Mother said, walking faster. It was almost time to cook dinner.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You shouldn't think you are a bad person. A kind heart and patience win anyone's heart, no matter how bad they think you are," Mother said, patting me on the shoulder.

I nodded and followed her. "Let's buy some vegetables and go home," Mother said when we reached the entrance of a busy street with many shops and vegetable vendors. Tibetans and Chinese farmers brought their homegrown vegetables by

cart to sell here.

"One *yuan* per bundle of spinach," hollered the sellers.

"What should we get?" asked Mother, looking at the vegetables.

"Potatoes," I recommended.

"OK, we can cook noodles" Mother said.

Almost everyone loves noodles but I did not like them very much. I picked out and ate the meat and potatoes and left the vegetables and noodles. After moving to Lhasa, I started to like this dish, but I do not know why.

"What vegetables do you want? They're fresh. I picked them from my garden this afternoon," said a tall, fit woman in her forties. I could tell she was from Lhasa by her dialect.

"Yeah, I'll buy some from you," Mother said.

"Where are you from? Amdo?" the woman asked, looking at us.

"No, from Kham," Mother answered with a smile.

"Maybe she is going to say something bad about Kham," I thought and waited.

"Really? Where in Kham? My husband is from Litang," said the woman.

"Oh! That's nice. We're from Lhasgan, which is near Litang," said Mother.

"I see. My husband is a very nice person," the woman said and smiled.

"That's good to know," said Mother and also smiled.

"Not all Lhasa people think Khampa are bad," I thought and hope began growing in my heart.

I realized that to change the situation I had to prove that Kham people were different from what they imagined. I gave up my despondency and started talking to and helping others whenever I could. When people did talk to me regularly, I told stories that illustrated the kindness of Kham people and how Tibetan they were. Several girls accepted me as a friend after a few months' effort; no one really considered me alien any more.

At first, I had problems understanding the Lhasa dialect when it was spoken quickly and I understood little of the classes. I had a hard time interacting with my classmates since they did not speak Amdo or Kham dialects, or Chinese. However, after a

month or so of chatting with my new friends, this problem disappeared and I spoke Lhasa dialect well enough that Lhasa people never guessed I was not a native.

I had a good friend named Yangzom, who was a top student who always worked hard. She came from a farming village near Uncle's gallery. Her father worked for a rock quarry while her Mother tended the fields. She had an older brother who went to senior middle school in a city in inner China. She was very proud of him. In Lhasa, it is considered an honor if your children study in inner China. Your Chinese improves dramatically and you are more likely to eventually get a good job. However, you are not taught Tibetan; everything is taught in Chinese if you are in such a class.

"My child no longer speaks Tibetan," complained those who send their children into major Chinese cities, but the funny thing is that they still choose to send their children to such schools.

I had never met my friend's brother, whom she regularly praised for being very smart.

"The big city schools in China only take top students, so of course he is very smart. I want to go to school there like my brother, I admire him," she said. All the students dreamed of attending such schools.

Both my friend and I studied hard and were consistently at the top of our class. Her dream was to attend an inland school while I dreamed to go to the best senior middle school in Lhasa City. I wanted to continue my Tibetan language education and also be near my family.

During my first semester of my second year in junior middle school, my family moved to Uncle Dorje Dondup's gallery, as did both of my aunts' families. I boarded at school and then went home on the weekend. Mother did not find a job, partly because we lived in a village where the gallery was located and partly because Father took some responsibility for the family by selling such items as Tibetan robes. Life was not great, but it was peaceful and simple. Then one day, my parents decided to separate and life became a nightmare.

"I'm home!" I called, stepping into the house one Friday afternoon after school. There was no reply. I looked around the

house, which had two rooms and a kitchen. Father wore a solemn expression and was sitting on the couch in the living room with his head leaning against the wall, and his legs crossed. I knew something was wrong. "Father, where is Mother?" I asked. He silently moved his head in the direction where Mother was. I then went to the other room.

"I'm home," I said. Mother was sitting in the corner of the room, crying. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were swollen. "What happened?" I asked, brushing away her tears with my hand.

"Nothing," she replied, her head down.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

"Nothing happened. Go find your brothers and bring them home. They went outside to play," said Mother. I went into the living room. Father sat as before.

"What happened? Why is Mother crying?" I asked.

"We fought," he said.

"Why did you fight?" I asked angrily, because I knew it was his fault whenever they fought.

He stared silently at the ceiling.

"Doomtso, find your brothers and cook some food for yourselves," called Mother from inside the room.

"OK," I said and left.

My brothers were playing by a river near the gallery. I took them home and cooked. They were young and did not understand much about what was happening. Mother did not come out of the room and did not eat. Father did not eat either. We finished eating and then he left without saying where he was going. He did not return. Mother told us to go to bed early. I wanted to ask her about what had happened, but I knew she did not want to talk.

I am sure Mother never imagined splitting us into two different families before they decided to separate. I had three siblings, all boys, and Mother loved us dearly. Father wanted at least one of us to live with him. Lhodrul and I did not want to go with him because we wanted to stay with Mother. My other two brothers were too young to understand what was going on. We did not love Father because he often wandered aimlessly in town and was rarely at home. After almost three entire days of



back and forth, Father left for Sichuan with Cheme and later remarried. Mother begged Father to leave Cheme with her and take whatever was in the house. She did not want to lose her son. Nevertheless, Father insisted on taking at least one child, though he did not know how to care for us. It was the saddest moment of my life. I still remember the tears in Cheme's eyes when he left with Father. He did not say anything, but I could feel his pain and sadness. I know he realized he would not see Mother and us again soon. Mother's eyes were swollen every morning when she woke and cooked for us. Yet she had to accept her fate. I cannot describe how much we missed brother Cheme after he left.

That was the end of our life with Father around. Mother worked as a sales assistant to support us. She never let us go hungry and kept all of us in school. She buried her life in dirt and hard work because she valued our education and believed that her hard work would provide a bright future for us. I knew all I could do was study to make her proud and happy.

My life in junior middle school continued successfully after I overcame those initial obstacles. I got the top scores in the entire school for three years, I published Chinese and Tibetan essays and poems in newspapers, and I won writing prizes. I received the school's 200 *yuan* honor roll award each term, and I also got the top prize in other competitions and activities. I represented our class of sixty students as the class monitor - an unusual honor for a girl - and I worked with teachers to manage the school's computer room and library.

In 2002, I won the 'outstanding student cadre' prize given by the Tibet Education Department. In 2003, I was chosen to be a countryside student journalist, which gave me the opportunity to visit rural villages and schools in different parts of Tibet. Afterwards, I gave a few talks to students in the school about my experiences. Giving speeches and taking questions from the whole school made me nervous, but it also made me more confident. These experiences helped develop my management skills and taught me how to interact with various people and how to learn about other people's lives.

# 18

## THE XINING CLASS

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I was miserable. I could not believe I was so nervous. I even wrote the dates on my hand in order to remember. As the date drew closer, my heart never stopped thumping. I had always been the number one student in the entire school.

All the teachers believed I would pass the exam to the best senior middle school in the city, and my family never doubted this. Still I was worried and anxious. I spent days and nights reviewing textbooks. However, things did not go as I thought, proving that what you think will happen may not, and what you never imagine, may. That summer, before the senior middle school entrance exam, my entire life changed in a way I had never considered.

The schoolmaster entered our classroom, murmured something to our math teacher, and then said, "Doomtso and Dawa come to the auditorium now." My classmates stared, as though we had done something bad. Some were murmuring. Many students were finding boyfriends and girlfriends, and the schoolmaster punished many of them. I thought maybe my classmates thought Dawa and I had such a relationship. I was puzzled why the schoolmaster had called us, but we followed obediently.

The auditorium was full of students from different classes. Dechen Wangmo was also there. Some strangers were in the front row. They looked as though they were from a different area, perhaps from some large cities in China. Their skin was not as dark as ours. We found two seats and sat.

"Today we have professors from Qinghai. They will choose our best students to study English in Xining. Let's welcome them," the schoolmaster said and we all clapped.

"First Mr. Gyatso will introduce what you need to do to pass this exam," said the schoolmaster and we clapped again.

"The exam is like this: First you have a translation exam,

and then we have an oral exam to test your speaking ability and bravery," he said and passed papers around. Short Tibetan and Chinese passages were on the paper. We were to translate Tibetan paragraphs to Chinese in twenty minutes and then translate the Chinese paragraphs to Tibetan in another twenty minutes. I finished the translation and was confident I had done a good job.

"Who is Sonam Doomtso?" said the man in Chinese some minutes after we had all finished and turned in our exam papers.

"Me," I said, raising my hand.

"Come stand here. You are chosen to take the second exam," he said. He called the names of nine more students who were to stay, including Dechen Wangmo. The other students left in disappointment.

"OK, you will take the next part of the exam. Wait outside. When I call your name, come inside. Clear?" he asked.

"Yes," we said and waited outside. We were called inside one by one. Some students came out with their head down. Some were terrified. I was next to last to enter. I was told to stand on the platform and face the recruiters. I was nervous. Three men questioned me in both Chinese and Tibetan. I had to answer without having a minute to think. I was calm. I thought everything I said sounded meaningful and reasonable. I was confident.

"OK, now you may leave," I was told.

I went out and waited impatiently, but confidently. Four of us were then chosen to study in Xining, including Dechen Wangmo and me. Later the man told us more about the school. I really liked that we paid nothing because that would help my family.

Mother was very happy about the news, but Grandmother was worried about sending us far away, though we finally convinced her.

Some teachers were angry. They thought all the effort they had invested in me was in vain if I did not attend the best senior middle school in the city. It was not my intention to hurt their feelings and I did not give up hope of getting a good score on the senior middle school entrance exam. I reviewed well, but

I was not worried or nervous about the exam.

I took the senior middle school entrance exam a few weeks later and was chosen to attend the best senior middle school in the city and another very good senior middle school in Chengdu. Still, I insisted on joining the English Training Program (ETP) in Xining.

An American teacher gave me my English name - Victoria - in my first English class. Many people told me that he was famous and also a very good teacher. I thought he was very serious and solemn.

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It was the first time for me to introduce myself to so many people. We were only allowed to speak English in class, which was challenging for students like me who had never studied English before, especially compared to some of my classmates who had learned a bit of English before joining the program. All I knew was 'yes' and 'no' and looked at my classmates with my mouth open when they spoke English. The second class was with another American teacher who was very good with beginners like me. Conditions in the school were not as good as in our former school, but later I realized it was the happiest time of my life.

Studying English was initially hard for me. The strangeness of the language and the situation were intimidating, but I had never been in such a competitive situation. In order to catch up with the other students, I spent all my free time studying. The hardest was speaking only English in class and participating. I was mischievous, but also timid.

I was soon able to read graded English readers. Spending a lot of time on this was key to my English development. My teachers taught the importance of using our time well. I cannot remember wasting time even once while in ETP.

We had to prioritize our activities and make good decisions. Our teachers were demanding, yet liberal. They did not care if you spoke English incorrectly as long as you were brave enough to speak. I felt foreigners emphasized having your voice heard. In most classrooms in China, you must keep your

mouth shut and listen. There is little communication and interaction between student and teacher. My foreign teachers encouraged us to debate certain topics, which I had never done before. I had never thought a classroom was a place to defend your ideas. We were even encouraged to debate with teachers, which I initially found disrespectful. I thought teachers were always right before coming to ETP. I had heard that debate was as an important part of learning in Tibetan monasteries, but never saw it applied in a classroom. In time, I found similarity in Western and the traditional Tibetan education system where a good instructor is understood as someone who sees their role not so much as passing on finished conclusions to the students, but rather to teach critical thinking.

Being away from home was another change. I had to learn to be independent, manage my own money, buy my own clothes, and take care of my cousins and Lhodrul, who later came to ETP. I was no longer a child living with my family, but an adult who had to learn to do things on my own and make my own decisions. I missed Mother terribly.

"Are you homesick? How is studying going?" asked Mother whenever I phoned her.

"I'm not homesick and study is fine," I always answered, even when I was really homesick and tired of my studies. I did not want her to worry. I never showed weakness in front of her because I knew it would sadden her.

Speaking English in the classroom with my foreign teachers and classmates dramatically improved my speaking ability as time passed. I was one of the best students in junior middle school, but ETP was a great challenge. I had to study hard to catch up with students whose English was better than mine. I had to worry about being called on by teachers in class and being unable to answer. I understood how people could be challenged when coming out of their small bubble. I no longer thought I was the best and realized that there was much more I needed to learn and explore.

I realized how different our cultures were in conversation with my foreign teachers. One of the major differences I found was that foreigners are more open, while Tibetans are relatively conservative. Anthropology and readings

about different cultures and perspectives opened my eyes to the outside world; I learned about the people of Israel, and the native people of Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Americas. I thought it would be interesting to meet such people in the future. I found anthropology to be a window through which I could see what was beyond Tibetan and Chinese cultures. I learned to appreciate different perspectives and values.

Gender inequality was a serious topic among girls and boys and created some tension. One feminist teacher from America raised gender awareness among girls. Some girls in my class and in the upper classes who had experienced gender inequality in their lives considered her a savior, while some boys disliked the problems they felt she created between boys and girls. I never experienced gender inequality in my family or even in the community where I grew up. I had more privileges than my brothers, so the topic of gender inequality was totally new to me and did not make much sense. I felt it created problems and tensions between students rather than solving problems. Sometimes certain foreign ideas bring problems to a community - something you never considered to be a problem may become a problem.

I loved watching Hollywood movies, especially action films. Cheap, pirated DVDs were easy to get and we could thus see current American movies. I spent evenings and weekends watching Hollywood movies. I was eventually able to understand two-thirds of the dialogue in the movies, but I was challenged by the vocabulary and the speed of speaking.

The ETP Library had collections of graded readers. I loved reading, especially short stories, novels, and autobiographies. I read about Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. *Night* by Elie Wiesel was one of my favorite books. I am impressed by the power of individuals who make a positive difference for mankind. I also loved fantasy novels. I read all three volumes of *Lord of the Rings* while in ETP. I loved the detailed description of the scenes. One teacher praised me highly for finishing those books when I was invited to describe my English learning experience with newly selected ETP students.

"ETP is great a place to study English. The progress we make here is amazing. We have students who have finished reading books in English after just a few years of studying English. Isn't that amazing?" said Mr. Tashi, the program leader. "Sonam Doomtso, tell us your experience in learning English and how you feel when you finish books in English," Mr. Tashi said.

"Hello, everyone! My name is Sonam Doomtso. I'm originally from Kham, but now my family lives in Lhasa. I have experienced great improvement in speaking, writing, and listening to English after coming to ETP. When I first arrived, I could only say 'hello' and 'OK', but now I am able to communicate with our foreign teachers and read English books. This is a perfect place to learn English. You will see progress as the days pass," I said, smiling at the students, whose faces were filled with curiosity and admiration.

"Did you find those books hard to read?" one student asked.

"Certainly. I had to read some paragraphs three times in order to understand fully. But, you feel very happy when you do understand," I said encouragingly.

Two years of preparation school went by and I successfully passed the entrance exam to the two-year Associate Degree program. I was really sad that Dechen Wangmo did not pass the exam to the Xining campus. The students with better scores remained at Qinghai Normal University in Xining, while the others attended the branch campus in Tsolho Prefecture, which was about three hours from Xining.

I studied hard in the Associate Degree Program and stayed among the top students. My teachers had great hope for my future and encouraged me to do community projects. I successfully implemented a few small projects such as opening libraries in rural Tibetan schools, providing clothes for poor people, and a managing a running water project in a rural Tibetan village. It was then that I more fully realized how much Tibetans need help. I also learned about the importance of cultural preservation from my foreign teachers, who were always interested in learning more about Tibetan culture. I was encouraged to record endangered Tibetan music, and record the

stories of elder Tibetans and cultural rituals. While doing so, I realized that much Tibetan culture will not exist after a hundred years. My heart began to feel heavy and dark. What can I do to help my dying culture? What can I do to preserve Tibetan culture? What can I do to help people in need? What can I do to help girls who work like animals and never attend school? How can we help Tibetan boys and men have proper jobs and stop killing themselves through drinking and fighting? I wanted to help change things happening around me, yet deeply felt the limitation of my education and abilities. Studying abroad then became my goal after the Associate Degree program. As I saw more and more students in upper classes going abroad to study, I decided that study abroad would allow me to better help my fellow Tibetans.



## GRANDFATHER'S DEATH

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We got off the train with our belongings, exhausted from two days of travel. It was already dark and the air felt much cleaner compared to Xining, where we attended school. "Maybe it will rain?" I thought.

"We are in Lhasa finally, *Om mani padme hum*, pray to Buddha," a few old nomads said emotionally, their faces radiating happiness and beatific smiles.

Beside Brother Lhodrul, my two cousins, and me, our other travel companions included several Amdo nomads visiting monasteries in Tibet. We shared the same railway carriage and had great conversations all the way to Lhasa. They were really nice people. We shared food on the single table the train provided. My nomad background meant I was utterly comfortable with these easy-mannered herders.

"Children, it was nice to meet you! I hope we'll see you again," the old man with whom we had chatted most said with a big smile.

"Nice to have met you, too. We wish you a nice time in Lhasa," we said as we shook his hand one by one.

He was from Henan Mongolian Autonomous County in Qinghai Province. He had been a nomad his whole life. It was his first time visiting Lhasa. He felt immensely lucky to visit holy Lhasa and then travel on to India.

Our family usually met us when we returned from school during holidays, but this time they said they were busy and could not come. This was odd but we thought maybe it was because they were building a new house. We finally got a taxi at around eleven p.m. Our house was around fifteen kilometers from the city center and most drivers were afraid of robbers and would not go that far. Our driver was a local Tibetan, who had been a taxi driver for more than six years. His glossy black hair curled over his forehead and ears. He had prominent

cheekbones, a large jutting jaw, and his small, black eyes gleamed with good humor.

"Are you students? Where do you go to school?" he asked.

"Yeah, we go to school in Xining City in Qinghai," we answered.

"Now you have a good chance to study, so study hard," he offered kindly.

"Thank you," we said.

"My family was very poor, so I've never been to school. It's hard to survive in this new society without formal education. Knowledge is really important," he continued.

Most shops were closed. Only a few had their lights on. The street lamps were dim and dreary. Traffic surged in the city. The sky was overcast with gray clouds and smog. Lights flickered one after another in the buildings along Main Street. The wind roared and rain fell mixed with sleet that peppered the window, sounding like a drum being beaten.

The driver coughed lightly as the taxi zoomed on.

The street lamps disappeared slowly in the immersing darkness. Everything became indistinctly observable in the distance. We knew we were near home.

"Please turn left at the bridge," Cousin said.

"OK, how far?" the driver asked.

"Not far," I answered, thinking the driver did not want to go very far.

"Now turn right," Cousin said.

Most households were already asleep. Only a few had lights on.

"Please stop in front of the red gate. Thanks very much," I said to the driver as he stopped just by the gate.

"How much?" I asked.

"You are all students, so twenty *yuan* is OK," he said kindly.

We took our packages from the back of the taxi. Our house gate was closed and the new house was only half-finished. We could not detect even slight movement and light in the house. We were cold and hungry.

"I think nobody is at home," Cousin said sadly.

"Maybe they are asleep," Brother Lhodrul said as he approached the gate.

"Let's knock on the gate and see if anybody opens it," I said.

"Yeah, right," Cousin said and knocked on the gate.

"Hello, Mother! Open the gate, we're here," called Cousin and knocked softly.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" somebody said loudly. We recognized Aunt Yangdrol's voice and heard footsteps approaching. The gate cracked open and Aunt Yangdrol stood there.

"I waited a long time. I thought you wouldn't come," she said, trying to smile. Her hair was loose about her face, gray and sooty. Her clothes were so dirty that they looked like she had worn them for years. She stepped back to let us in, taking some of our bags.

"The new house isn't finished so we put up this plastic shelter," she explained as we entered a temporary shelter warm from a fire. Smoke stung my nose and made my eyes water. Furniture was piled in a corner. It seemed departure was imminent. Only Aunt Yangdrol and her little son, Jigme, were there.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"They are at your uncle's place," she said in a low, troubled voice as she poured milk tea for each of us.

"Why are they there?" I asked.

"Uncle asked monks to chant, so they went there to help," Aunt Yangdrol said.

"Chant for what?" Cousin asked, sipping milk tea.

"Nothing special," Aunt said, looking away, and acting strangely.

"I cooked noodles for you," said Aunt Yangdrol, ladling noodles from a pot into bowls.

"Are they returning tonight," I asked.

"Maybe not. No, I think not. Finish your food and go to sleep. It's very late now," she said.

We went to bed after we each had two bowls of noodles.

I awakened with a sense of dread I did not understand. The room looked strange. The fire was flickering and tea was

boiling silently.

"Aunt, Aunt," I called from my bed. Nobody answered. "Maybe she went out for something," I thought.

I dressed and went out the door. I could not see Aunt Yangdrol. The yard was a mess with bottles, baskets, cement bags, and building tools scattered everywhere. Our new house had three floors. Though not completed, it was magnificent. The air was clean after rain that had washed dirt off the grass and flower leaves.

"You're up? Why not sleep a little more. It's still early," a voice from behind said.

"I can't sleep. I want to go to Uncle's. Is that OK?" I asked.

Aunt did not answer. She looked troubled and uncomfortable.

"Is that OK?" I asked again, looking into her eyes.

"You can go after breakfast. Go after breakfast," she repeated. She silently went inside and I followed. Brother Lhodrul and my cousins were still deeply asleep.

"Do you want to eat *tsamba* or *khiti*?"<sup>10</sup> Aunt Yangdrol asked, taking a clean bowl from under the table.

"*Tsamba*," I said. I thought I could finish it more easily than *khiti* and leave sooner.

Aunt Yangdrol handed me a bowl of *tsamba*, I ate it, and then I started off to Uncle's home. "The sun isn't up yet. Maybe it isn't going to rise," I thought. It was so cold that I could see my breath in wisps. The wind wailed like an unhappy infant. A few birds flew in the sky, their wings twanging and phosphorescent. I looked about for a bus. There were none. I decided to walk down a small path through a field to Uncle's place. At one point, my feet slipped into a ditch used to irrigate

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<sup>10</sup> Barley flour is mixed with butter, cheese, and sugar, and then flattened and put in the bottom of a bowl. Tea is poured in the bowl, allowed to sit for a short while, and then tea is drunk and the tongue is used to lick and then eat the top layer. This is repeated until the flour mixture is finished.

the fields. Icy water soaked my shoes and stockings.

The studio gate was open. I walked in. It was deathly silent. I was not sure where to go since there were so many rooms. I went straight ahead while glancing right and left.

"Doomtso," someone called. I turned and saw a painter. "When did you arrive?" he asked.

"Last night," I said.

"Do you know where Mother is?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'll call her," he said.

"That's OK, I'll go myself," I said.

"No, no. You stay here. I'll go," he said and ran to call Mother.

I followed slowly, puzzled by his odd behavior.

Mother and Grandmother suddenly emerged from one room. Mother ran and hugged me tightly in her arm. She cried very hard. I was terrified and confused.

"Mother, what is it?" I asked nervously.

"Your Grandfather has passed away," she sobbed.

Her words drove me mad. Tears streamed down my cheeks. A numb feeling stirred in my chest.

"Mother, tell me it's not true. Tell me Grandfather is here!" I cried, feeling dizzy and sick.

Mother embraced me tightly.

"I want to see Grandfather," I said and ran into the room they had just come out of. Juniper and sagebrush smoldered in the hearth. The sheer number of people there obscured the room.

Many monks were chanting and many people were standing and sitting. I had never seen so many people gathered in one room before. Men and women stood near the walls, blocking the firelight. Others squatted near the cooking stove, chanting and drinking tea. I had seen many of them before.

"Where is Grandfather?" I asked Mother.

"We already took him to the sky burial ground," Mother said in a harsh flat voice, her eyes welling with tears.

"No! It's not true. You told me Grandfather was healthy when I asked you," I said angrily.

She did not reply.

Tears hovered inside my bleary eyes again and spilled

out once more. My feet were hot and tired. My neck and shoulders ached so badly that each time I raised an arm, I was sure it would be the last. Suddenly, I fainted.

When I woke, Aunt Tsering Lhamo was sitting by me. Her face was as dark as the sky before a storm. Her hair was disheveled and her robe was stained with oil from making food for the monks who were chanting for Grandfather.

Buddhism dominates our life. We ask several lamas to perform funeral rites when someone dies because the lamas can guide the departed on the path of reincarnation.

"The lamas need to chant one more day," Mother said.

"Your grandfather was really lucky. Just on the day he was about to pass away, we found a very great lama from India who told us Grandfather would certainly have an excellent rebirth. He said your grandfather was a very good person," Mother continued.

"What else? Tell me more," I urged.

"A lama from Drugong Monastery said that people he attends as they die often weep, shout, are afraid of death, and beg him to save them. He said Grandfather was very different - very quiet and calm," Mother said.

We try not to cry when a person is dying, but this is very difficult. Crying prevents the soul from finding the right way after their death. Mother had saved all her tears until the last day, when grandfather was sent to the sky burial ground. Grandmother said if you give your body to the birds, you will not go to Hell. The birds are not normal dakinis; they are all very special goddesses.

"Who took Grandfather to the sky burial ground?" I asked.

"Uncle Samkho, Uncle Dorji Dondup, and other relatives," Mother said.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"Really well. Birds flew in from different directions to enjoy the meal. Before the workers cut his body into pieces, the birds came and took away the skin of his face, which means he was a very good person. Many lamas say birds only do this when a person is really good. If the person is bad, the birds won't even come to the sky burial ground," Mother said.

A lump rose in my throat. I was speechless. Not seeing Grandfather made me feel morose, because he had always been a good, kind man. But I was happy for him, because I knew he no longer had to worry about death, disease, and the vastness of the universe. It was late when the monks finished chanting. The next day would bring more chanting. The sky was dark when we returned and I reached my bed. I knew I would not sleep easily.

I breathed deeply and sadly. I never knew death could be so quick. I deeply regretted that I had not spent more time with Grandfather. How much I wanted to see him! But it was too late. I was childish to have thought my family members would never die. I realized nothing is forever. I looked at the people around me who would leave me someday. "Now is the time to love and care for those who love me because if I don't, I will later be full of regret," I resolved.

# 20

## RISING HOPES

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I stood at the airport, looking at the crowds passing by. I started to think about the journey Grandfather made to Lhasa. His courage and determination enabled him to make such a hard journey in the very real face of death. I was about to make a journey from Beijing to the USA, beyond familiar borders into strange new worlds, which physically seemed much easier and safer than Grandfather's. Grandfather might have felt spiritually safer moving through the center of his own cultural sphere, while I was going to a land of strangers thousands of kilometers away. Grandfather's journey brimmed with meaning related to karma and luck and he achieved something that he felt strongly about and also a better rebirth for his next life.

"What is the meaning of my journey?" I thought. I did not have an answer at that moment, felt a little homesick, and wished Mother was there with me. I longed for at least one Tibetan to be with me so I would feel less desperate and lonely.

Mother wept bitterly when she escorted me to take the plane from Lhasa to Beijing. Uncle Dorje Dondup offered to drive, Lhodrul came, and Aunt Yangdrol also came. Everyone said goodbye as I got in the car at the gate of our house in Lhasa. Grandmother's eyes were red. She had cried the whole morning. When she first heard the news about me being accepted to study in America, she thought it was a crazy idea and had not changed her mind. Going to America was like going to another planet for her and she could not accept that I had actually decided to go there to study. During Grandmother's time, even going to a town that was an hour away from home was considered far and dangerous.

"You already have an Associate Degree; you can get a job and have a comfortable life. Why must you go so far



away?" Grandmother said.

"I'll get a better job after graduating. My teachers encouraged me to go and I want to see the dreamland of freedom," I said.

"Nowadays, children are too aggressive and adventurous, always thinking there's something better somewhere else, without realizing home is the best refuge," Grandmother said disappointedly and walked away.

Mother never said anything against my decision. She supported whatever I decided as right and important. Though she preferred that I find a job and stay with her, she never asked me to stay. She knew I would have a better life after studying in America and she was willing to make sacrifices for that. She told me she was concerned that I might get sick and, because she did not have a passport, she would not be able to come care for me.

"Don't worry. America has a very good healthcare system, and there will be a clinic at school. I'll be fine," I said. I knew little about healthcare in America, but I did not want her to worry.

All these things crossed my mind as I waited in the airport. I reflected on how I had struggled for this chance. I would leave my family and home; had struggled through an exhausting application process; almost all my classmates had gone home after graduation; I had taken the TOEFL in a big Chinese city where I had gotten lost a few times; and I had written so many application essays that I even wrote essays in my dreams.

I checked the time and realized there were still two hours before my flight. I checked in and waited. Many other people were also waiting. I was surprised to see so many Han Chinese going to America. I was the only Tibetan there. I thought about my life - living in a tent, herding yaks and horses, walking on the grassland, riding a horse in the snow. I never imagined going so far physically and mentally from my deep-rooted traditions and lifestyle. Maybe I was inspired by Grandfather's journey to Lhasa, Mother's patience and continuous support, my teachers' encouragement, and the great people I had learned about from the books I had read. I was

changing from being a simple herder to someone with greater visions and dreams. I wanted to achieve more than just raising livestock.

Later on the plane, I looked out the window and thought about my childhood ambition of getting to the top of the mountain. I was now higher than the mountains and ready for the greater challenges of crossing cultural and national boundaries.

# PHOTOGRAPHS

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- Photograph 1. Sonam Doomtso in the arms of her aunt (right) on the Kunub grassland.
- Photograph 2. Aunt Yangdrol near the family tent.
- Photograph 3. Sonam Doomtso's grandmother's tent with her father, grandmother, grandfather, Aunt Yangdrol, Uncle Samkho, and brother.
- Photograph 4. Uncle Samkho's favorite racehorse in the village where Sonam Doomtso lived in Lhasgan Township.
- Photograph 5. Uncle Samkho about to join a horserace in Walang.
- Photograph 6. A local man at his winter house made of stone and wood.
- Photograph 7. Riding a yak on the Walang summer pasture.
- Photograph 8. Local women outside their home.
- Photograph 9. A local woman near her black yak-hair tent in Walang in the 1990s.
- Photograph 10. Sonam Doomtso's family dancing at home during Losar.
- Photograph 11. Two year old Sonam Doomtso (left).
- Photograph 12. Two month old Sonam Doomtso and her mother with the family's yaks.
- Photograph 13. Sonam Doomtso's family eats outside a summer tent.
- Photograph 14. Local Tibetan women.
- Photograph 15. Local Tibetan men go once or twice a year with their horses to make offerings to mountain deities.
- Photograph 16. Sonam Doomtso in Kunub.
- Photograph 17. Local women wear their best robes on special days.
- Photograph 18. Chuzha Monastery, Lhasgan Township, 1998.





































































## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**S**onam Doomtso was born in 1987 to a traditional Tibetan family, in Kunub Community, Lhasgan Township, Kangding County, Karze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. When she was three months old, her family moved to Walang Community, Lhasgan Township. When she was eight years old, her family moved to Lhasgan Township Town where she attended school. At the end of 1999, her family moved to Lhasa. She joined the English Training Program at Qinghai Normal University in Xining City in 2004. She graduated with an Associate Degree in Tibetan and English languages in 2008. She is currently studying for a BA in Environmental Studies and Economics at Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts.

# NON-ENGLISH TERMS

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## A

Ani, ཨ་ནི། a ne

Ani Zompa, ཨ་ནི་འཛོམ་པ། a ne 'dzom pa

Akhe, ཨ་ཁུ། a khu

Amnyi, ཨ་མྱི། a myes

Amnyi Tsepal, ཨ་མྱི་ཆེ་དཔལ། a myes tshe dpal

Ama, ཨ་མ། a ma

Amdo, ཨ་མདོ། a mdo

## B

Basang, བ་སངས། pa sangs

Bon, བོན། bon

## C

Cheme, འཆི་མེད། 'chi med

Chengdu, 成都

Chotso, ཆོས་མཚོ། chos mtsho

## D

Dadron, ལྷ་སྟོན། zla sgron

Dargye, དར་རྒྱལ། dar rgyas

Dawa, ལྷ་བ། zla ba

Dechen Wangmo, བདེ་ཆེན་དབང་མོ། bde chen dbang mo

Dedan, བདེ་ལྷན། bde ldan

Dolkar, ལྷོ་ལ་དཀར། sgrol dkar

Dolma, ལྷོ་ལ་མ། sgrol ma

Dondup, དོན་འགྲུབ། don 'grub

Doomlo, དུང་ལོ། dung lo

Doomtso, དུང་མཚོ། dung mtsho

Dorchu, རྩོ་ཚས། rdo chos

Dorje Dondup, རྩོ་རྩེ་དོན་འགྱུབ། rdo rje don 'grub

Dorje, རྩོ་རྩེ། rdo rje

Drugong, འབྲི་གུང་། 'bri gung

Dunglung, རྩོད་ལུང་། stod lung

## G

Gelug, དགེ་ལུགས། dge lugs

Gesar, གེ་སར། ge sar

Gyalgo, རྒྱལ་སྒོ། rgyal sgo

Gyalmo ngochu, རྒྱལ་མོ་དངུལ་ཚུ། rgyal mo dngul chu

Gyalmo ngodor, རྒྱལ་མོ་དངུལ་རྩོ། rgyal mo dngul rdo

Gyatso, རྒྱ་མཚོ། rgya mtsho

## H

Han, 汉

Henan, 河南

## J

Jigme, འཇིགས་མེད། 'jigs med

Jokang, རྩོ་ཁང་།

*jyoma*, གྲོ་མ། gro ma

## K

Kangding, 康定

Karze, དཀར་མཛེས། dkar mdzes

*khadak*, ཁ་བཏགས། kha btags

Khado, མཁའ་འགྲོ་ mkha' 'gro

Kham, ཁམས། khams



Khamba, ཁམས་པ། Khams pa

khiti, ཁག་ཉིས། khag ltes

Kunub, སྐུ་ནུབ། sku nub

## L

lama, ལམ་མ། bla ma

Lhamo, ལྷ་མོ། lha mo

Lhasa, ལྷ་ས། lha sa

Lhasgan, ལྷ་སྒང་། lha sgang

Lhodrul, ལོ་གྲོས། blo gros

Losar, ལོ་གསར། lo gsar

## N

Nechung, གནས་ཆུང་། gnas chung

Ngangra, ངང་ར། ngang ra

Nyima, ཉི་མ། nyi ma

## O

*om mani padme hum, oM ma Ni pad+me hUM* ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ

## P

Padyang, པད་གཡང་། pad g.yang

Pedkar, པད་དཀར། pad dkar

Pedlha, པད་ལྷ། pad lha

Pedma, པད་མ། pad ma

Potala, པོ་ཏ་ལ། po ta la

## Q

Qinghai, 青海

Chuja, ཇོ་སྐྱུ་གཤམ། chos grags

## S

Sakag, ས་བཀག། sa bkag

Samkho, བསམ་ཁོ། bsam kho

Serda, གསེར་རྟ། gser rta

Sichuan, 四川

Sonam Doomtso, བསོད་ནམས་དུང་མཚོ། bsod nams dung mtsho

Songtsan Gampo, སྟོང་བཙན་སྐམ་བོ། srong btsan sgam po

Sotse, བསོད་ཚེ། bsod tshe

Suolang Dongcuo, 索朗东措

## T

*tangka*, ཐང་ག། thang ga

Tashi, བཀ་ཤིས། bkra shis

Thunkho, དོན་ཁོ། don kho

*tsamba*, རྩམ་པ། rtsam pa

Tsechu, ཆེས་ཚུ། tshes chu

Tselha, ཆེ་ལྷ། tshe lha

Tsering Lhamo, ཆེ་རིང་ལྷ་མོ། tshe ring lha mo

Tsering, ཆེ་རིང་། tshe ring

Tsering Chotso, ཆེ་རིང་ཆོས་མཚོ། tshe ring chos mtsho

Tsewang Paljor, ཆེ་དབང་དཔལ་འབྱོར། tshe dbang dpal 'byor

Tshe dpal, ཆེ་དཔལ། tshe dpal

## W

Walang, བ་ལང་། ba lang

Wangchen, དབང་ཆེན། dbang chen

## X

Xining, 西宁

## Y

Yangdrol, གཡང་རྒྱལ། g.yang sgrol

*yuan*, 元

## Z

Zhang Dong, 张东

Zompa, འཕྱུལ་པ། 'dzom pa

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